

CAMPING AT THE EDGE OF AMERICAN HISTORY:

THE OREGON COAST IN WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS



— BY J. B. ELHEM —





FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

Why am I giving this e-Book away for free?

At the end of 2012, I finished this book. It was meant to take the world by storm and make me rich. In April of 2013, while preparing the book for its debut, I went insane - raving and lunatic, pants-crapping insane. After a weekend in jail and a ten-day stay locked inside a mental health facility - which it should be noted fixed my problem - I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and my plans for the book began to circle the toilet bowl. I didn't know it would actually go down. I thought it was too big, or too important, or that some cosmic force would stop it and make things right.

But bipolar disorder - I denied it at first, but now there can be no doubt - does more than sabotage the best-laid plans of mice and men. It can destroy them. So now, at the very start of 2018, I cast my book to the digital wind. After years of denying it existed and blaming the mystery force - who, truth be told, did absolutely nothing, and that was part of the problem, I supposed - I throw it back at the public that barely had a chance to reject it honestly, as though it sucked. I don't think it sucks. Revisiting it years later, I find it still contains the spark of what I thought I saw when I thought I saw a spark of something unique.

It's a free photo-intensive e-Book now. I'm swallowing what tiny pride I had - a molehill into a mountain and

then back into a molehill - and overturning my hat on the sidewalk to take what can still be had from it. I'm begging - begging anyone to read it and begging those who like it to donate whatever they wish to donate (see hard-sell at the end of the book). Having literally collected pennies from the gutter (seriously, I did that, and still pick up every penny I see) no donation is too small. Honestly, a quarter or a single dollar isn't about to be rejected. The fact is, it is a viable business strategy, and the only one left me.

Bipolar is a mood disorder and not, as most people seem to assume, a *personality* disorder. People with the disease can be touchy, no doubt about it, but if your mood swung as wildly as a rocking ship ride at an amusement park and you couldn't control it or at least slow it down, I submit that you would be a tad touchy too. It doesn't make us necessarily bad people.

I should note that unlike when I wrote the book, I now have health insurance. And I've found medications that seem to work for me, a process that can take some bipolar sufferers years. Once I seriously began investigating the effects of various medications - and admitted to myself that I had a problem and the problem was a real, physical one and not just an interminable series of bad days punctuated by occasional ecstatic ones - the process of finding the right combination of medications took me about two years. My panic attacks while on *The Road* now make sense, and I've got anxiety medications to deal with such problems when they arise, though they tend to make me sleep too much.

At times, rereading the book Now after five years of holding the book in the deepest of deep freezes, it feels

at times as if someone else wrote it. In a very real way, I suppose someone did: can any of us truthfully claim that five years of being alive doesn't change us, at least a little? Were I to write the book Now, I would inevitably do things a bit differently. For one thing, I'm a better writer. As significantly for the book, a product of mental activity, my bloodstream now courses with powerful antidepressants and antipsychotics. That's bound to have an impact.

I wonder how much time is spent writing diary entries than is spent reading them. My guess is that the former is far more popular than the latter. The writing of this book - being sucked into a project that for several months dominated my life - seems like a bigger effort than what is here, and time having passed, it is if all that is left are artifacts of who I once was. Maybe this is why we are less likely to read what we've written in a diary than to write a new entry. It is uncomfortable to be reminded that we've changed, and it is life-affirming to make a new mark, even if we don't have anything especially profound to say about it.

Presented here then, at absolutely no cost or restrictions on how it may be used (see Creative Commons Attribution licensing, which now covers use of this e-Book) I offer what required years to write and a few days to destroy, an attempt to squeeze any loose pennies out of the bottom of it. It isn't a crap book. I still find it well-written, and rather admire the photographs, now seeming as if someone else had taken them. I hope you will enjoy it too.

It is my attempt at maximalist-surrealist writing and photography. See you when it's over.





I grew up in rural Indiana. This is relevant only as a way of beginning a story, an ultimate starting line. The state and the region don't show up much in this book except, again, as an origin.

A little over four years ago I felt myself slipping. I was renting a big, empty house in the foothills of Tucson, Arizona, from which I had started my own computer consulting business and was scraping by financially, which seems now to have been a minor miracle. I'm a good programmer, but owning one's own business requires much more than just being good at something; it requires skills that I have now concluded that I never really had at all – or at least the prerequisites for them, like avarice.

What began as a mild itch became a festering, gnawing suspicion that I had taken a wrong turn somewhere and that I had compounded the problem by trying to go faster down that wrong trail, as if it would eventu-

ally lead me to the *right* one. My life had become one of working ever-harder to make money to afford things I had only ever used to salve my own dissatisfaction in the first place, self-medication via credit card and a too-familiar story. Something had to change.

I put all of my belongings into a storage locker in Tucson – they are still there – and bought a used fifth-wheel trailer. I pored over maps and traced hypothetical lines with a finger. Then Day One arrived, and I jumped off the cliff I had been contemplating – a come-what-will need to see something, *anything*, before I myself dissolved to Nothing. I would follow whims and potential fortunes – the “Great Recession” having decimated my pathetic business as it had so many others, people I would see living in vans and redeeming food stamps in grocery store checkout lines throughout the nation – until I found what I was seeking, whatever *that* was.

There is a ubiquitous notion built into the American character, one that is certain that by running away

from a situation it will change in one's absence, or that one will find something he never suspected that will permanently alter his life circumstances, or that the promise of the American dream – despite its having been battered to incomprehensibility by its *deus ex* appearances in so many films and television shows and its self-consciously ironic overuse by generations of post-modernist cynics and pessimists – might actually be more than a dream, might actually be possible, that all that might be required is the guts to roll onto an Unknown Road and vanish into it.

Besides, I was running from nothing. I was only running *to* things, it seems to me now.

I took my three cats with me – Sid, Torgo, and Steve F-180 (so named because he came from a breeder of lab animals, who had stamped his ear with a tattoo bearing that designation). They collectively deserve distinguished medals and ribbons of valor, the highest plaudits afforded by The Road – a golden fast-food wrapper or a certified platinum coffee cup lid glued to a plaque of some sort. They – and my Ford truck, for that matter – are unspoken heroes in this book, like Edgar Allen Poe's Whiskey or Hunter S. Thompson's Peyote or Kurt Vonnegut's Will-to-Live, my cats chill me out: and thank heaven for little miracles.

Traveling with cats may make me an oddity (if never an absolute rarity), but I submit that cats are perfect traveling companions assuming the traveler himself is otherwise sound. Cats are aesthetically pleasing and clean, necessities in such cramped quarters. They sleep all day and most of the night, are Fun to play with, and defecate in a box in a corner, a procedure that seldom involves me touching warm feces – a definite plus in

my book.*

If there is a single indivisible unit of this book, it is in the attempted depiction through words and images of places, above all else. I try to render them sensually, the way they feel as spots of ground on which to stand (or sit, or lie), the most succinctly defined physical space a person can occupy.

Relationships between any two places are fairly irrelevant in such contexts, although a meager attempt is sometimes made in the chapter introductions. In other words, I am less interested in relating how I got there than what is to be found there, whatever it may be – the emphasis is on place.

A map of my journey isn't needed but if one were attempted it would be drawn rather sloppily in broad strokes from the North Coast to the South Coast (overlapping slightly on either side by a bit of the neighboring states). The narrative hints at a roughly-defined north to south route, but the events are largely out of order, rendering any attempts at literary cartography worthless anyway.

All of the traveling described in this book involved a sort of routine, but one that changed from day to day and week to week, the destinations – all of which involved going from one state park or county park or national forest to another – selected solely on my wish to see what this or that place on a map actually looked like, what photo opportunities might be found, and then solely on my wish to return to them, to re-expe-

* Footnote: Although aside from the pooping, dogs are awesome too. They are like cats with head colds.

rience these places again and again, like listening to a favorite album.

Because these are all public places, this meant that I was constantly living in public among strangers, which is hard to do. I am a fairly shy person. Not abysmally so, but chronically, like a thing seen so often in oneself that it must belong to his being, like a foot. I am fine with my shyness – I don't suppose it makes me some kind of faulty person – but shyness combines with loneliness too well for me to be entirely comfortable with it.

I am often the only “long-term resident” in any given campground, aside from the hosts. Not only are these places like small cities in the summertime, they are cities that change somewhat from day to day and change completely from weekend to weekend, all residents moving out to be replaced by new ones, the constant turnover like life in a hotel but with less privacy, comfort, and convenience: new makeshift cities rise when the old ones fall, recurrent exoduses and geneses each day at checkout time.

I capitalize, hyphenate, and compound and concatenate words and phrases at will. I do this not to be cute, but for effect.

I also take liberties with the expression of numbers. My theory is that people are asked too often to consider numbers in their numerical forms, often when paying bills or obeying traffic laws. So, screw numbers: how do you feel now? (I've played with the page numbering for the same reason – it doesn't matter, don't worry about it.)

United States Highway 101 is expressed as numerals because it is my muse, my Mother Road. (And because

“one-oh-one” looks stupid and “one-zero-one” sounds stupid.) Years aren't spelled out for a number of reasons, the most salient being that a year is a unit of measure actually worthy of numeralized nomenclature: a lot can happen in a year. Years expressed as numbers often seem to have their own emotional gravity, a force strong enough that the events themselves don't even have to be mentioned. 1492, 1776, and 1984 are cases in point.

I see a camera as a tool of exploration, like a compass or a good walking stick. It gives me a valid reason to go where I otherwise wouldn't – how useful is that?

My camera lets me try to catch what I see and pull it out and show it to everyone, my little moment on a beach or in a forest or atop a sand dune transformed into a physical artifact (after it has been shredded to digits inside the camera, reassembled as digits in yet another plastic electronic box, and finally spat onto paper, nothing but synthetic ink on tree flesh in the end).

The basic concept is simplicity itself: here is a moment that happened to me. At this point it becomes an expression and as such it is no longer a moment frozen in isolation but the first line of a conversation. The photos in this book then are like roadsigns, semi-autonomous one-way bits of information intended to precisely pinpoint a location: you and I are always right here together, sharing this exact moment.

The language of roadsigns can sometimes be inelegant and weird; for present purposes it is enough that they point the way.

As for stylization or anything aspiring to “truth” in my photos, I claim only the things which only I can claim,

the truth and the style, however humble, thus always being my own. That is, I claim the right to stylize only because it is mine to claim.

The photos here have been culled from over one hundred-thousand that accumulated over the course of four years, captured on digital cameras of various capabilities and stuck on a hard drive to await this moment. Many of the shots included here are the results of attempts to learn. Sloppy? Undeniably. But I think there is value in the odd snips and offcuts. I don't believe that technical ability is all. Even Nothing is something.

Many inspirations have ancient roots. Nature and time were dominant themes for Roman and Greek poets and philosophers, as they are for me. Ancient historians frequently embedded personal scientific observations into their accounts, and those of their travels most particularly. One senses a bit of gloating.

Clement of Alexandria, working at the dawn of the Third Century, attempted with his work *Stromateis* (meaning "patchwork") to create a book that could be enjoyed like a stroll through a meadow, where ideas grow wild and are free to be plucked or ignored as the reader wishes. This book aspires to be like an ocean, for similar reasons.

Some modern scholars make very esoteric points of their life's work. The generalist is always going to trample over subtleties, plow under the battlefields whose battles are sacred to the specialist, reduce to one-liners entire schools of thought. Specialists of all sorts should approach this book semi-warily.

This is not a guide book. It is a work of creative nonfic-

tion, meaning that the facts are true, but the narrative relies on literary techniques similar to those used in fiction. Some specific place names are suppressed, to encourage those interested to find them on their own (and prevent everyone else from getting bored).

I want to give tourists a book that instructs them on a version of the Oregon Coast story that lies beyond hotels and restaurants and highway waysides. The real value to be found lies off the beaten path and requires wandering and wet pantlegs to reach.

I want to give locals a snapshot of themselves as seen by an outsider, reversing the usual dynamic like a love letter written by a roving anti-tourist.

But the real physical space is literarily abstracted, too, such that these should feel like places *based* on real places for those unfamiliar with them, those alive Now or someday to be alive: because time is an abstracted concept in this book, too, for what it might be worth in the long run.

The slight coherent narrative that does exist roughly describes a meandering path that took place over the course of three years or so (it took me a year of full-time travel before I even made it here). The story otherwise roams freely within these constraints – and habitually outside of them – with little regard for formality. We will swing pendulously through space and time. It will be Fun.

So here is the result of four years' effort, the photos captured and prose written wholly on The Road. In the beginning, I am an ancient spore washed up on an alien coast. By The End, I am a pot-bound ball of roots.

– J. B. Elhem, Manzanita, December 2012

Second Edition

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PROLOGUE: EDGE OF A CONTINENT

“I can go no further without a boat,” a tourist shouts into a cell phone. He has left his rental car at the parking area – where a jetty made of black boulders and dumped into the sea years ago begins its quarter-mile reach into the raging waves – and gone for a stroll, as have I. I overhear him because he is shouting into his phone, to make himself heard over the thunderous, gut-rattling roar.

He is reporting to the folks back home on his journey, or else he has never considered that there might be a natural boundary in his way at any point in the great expanse of the American West. Or, for all I know, he is on a trip around the world and has forgotten his map, but I don’t think so: he is laughing.

I suspect the first of these possibilities is the closest

to the truth. He wanted to see where the great Road went – although it is impossible to know without asking which particular Road he followed to get here, or where his starting point was – so he followed it until he could go no further.

It is a story as old as the nation itself. The knowledge – even just the *suspicion* – that there is so much more to the continent to be explored has driven Americans and others to this point – if not this particular point, then to one like it – from time immemorial. This is where human habitation of the Americas first began thousands of years ago as those seeking greener pastures and fatter game crossed a temporary land bridge from Asia.

It is the boundary of the continent, but not a border:

the land simply ends in the nothingness of the ocean. But then, the Pacific ocean is not a nothingness, but merely the place where the land is subsumed by water.

The man turns away and I can no longer hear what he is shouting into his phone. He prowls the jetty as he talks, restless like me. A stiff gale coats us both with sea spray while brown pelicans navigate circles down the jetty and back out to sea, to return to shore – lifting themselves periodically over the crest of a wave to plunge into the churning wake behind it, to come up with a fish to be gulped down – and down the jetty again to start the cycle over.

I ponder his comment about the boat. Having crossed the continent myself a time or two, it is not a subject I have not considered before. What would it be like to weigh anchor and sail to Asia, or back to Alaska where the American story began? It is idle speculation – I don't yet have the means to actually make it happen – but as the man turns back toward me so that his words to the people back home are again carried to me by the wind, my idle speculation seems less so.

Thus arrives the denouement: “Maybe I can rent one,” the man says, and I can tell he's only partly joking.



The West Coast is the most manifest of the many manifest destinies in play for those who have opted to start over, a psychological extension and logical end point of the nation, with apologies to Alaska and Hawaii and all the other colonies of the original thirteen.

I feel like I have been here before, but it is true only in my imagination, not in physical space. I had planned to drive to the coast on an earlier cross-country solo trip, an earlier attempt to find a Home – and I have a memory, too, of making the choice not to come here.

I made the final decision while stalled in traffic in downtown Portland in a pounding rain. Had I turned left, it would have extended my trip and pushed what was already the extreme apogee of my trip a little further to the west, right to the Edge. But I was tired, depressed by the dreary late autumn weather, and just wanted to go Home. I turned right and vanished into a fog-smothered Columbia River Gorge, to begin the long trip back east. I would eventually settle in Tucson, Arizona, a city that had earlier charmed me more than any other on the same trip. This all happened fifteen years ago.

That left turn I didn't take – that missed connection – is what haunts me. Had I come here the first time, would I have moved here? How would my life have been different? What have I missed? Which faces in this crowd are those of friends (or even enemies) that I have failed to find all these years?

Mysteries abound. These pages are haunted.

Travelers gather at the margins of the land and stare at the sea like it were a finish line of a sort. It is the place to watch the end of the race, where the sun goes down on the day, every day, at last.

People don't really "pass through" the Oregon Coast unless they are going from one part of it to another. It is one of the few places in a nation of automobiles that can make that claim. One either lives here or is a visitor here, or, in my case, both.

The first arrivers to these continents – having crossed the Bering Strait at the beginning of time, for all historical intents and purposes – had no idea what they would find. Ahead of them they would only have seen the towering blue-white walls of glaciers, foreboding misty mountains, and vast sheets of icebound bogs and swamps. They had no idea that they had discovered not just one but two continents: in fact, a whole New World.

They didn't know, but curiosity and hungry bellies must have driven them on, like Captain Ahab gone out looking for a little fish.

I first approach the Oregon Coast by way of Astoria, my first glimpse of the ocean caught between semi-trailers and surfboards strapped to the tops of cars. From Day One in Arizona I have spent about nine months completing a whale-shaped loop that took me through my Midwestern childhood stomping grounds and then through the Deep South in wintertime – Spanish moss on live oaks and barbeque and boiled peanutes galore – then the entire length of Texas, back through the Southwest and into the Northwest via Utah and Idaho. As I pull into my oceanside campground, the idea that I have been headed here the whole time hits me all at once, like an original idea.

I begin already to hope that someday it will be my ultimate destination, but for now it is simply the next place on my list of places to visit while I am still traveling.

Now that I am here my plans are vague, but I have done what I set out to do – I have completed a solo tour around the country by myself in my own private adventure-pod, my cabin-on-wheels. I've temporarily lived in state parks from coast to coast, rolling slowly to experience the places more thoroughly, and I'm rolling still, still rolling slowly.

My cross-country travels have already had their effects on me, even if I don't know it yet. I am already different.

So I get out, take off my shoes and roll up my pantlegs, and walk into the surf for the first time.

“O the Joy!”

– William Clark

“Their baskets are formed of cedar bark and beargrass so closely interwoven with the fingers that they are watertight without the aid of gum or rosin; some of these are highly ornamented with strans of beargrass which they dye of several colours and interweave in a great variety of figures; this serves them the double purpose of holding their water or wearing on their heads; and are of different capacities from that of the smallest cup to five or six gallons; they are generally of a conic form or reather the segment of a cone of which the smaller end forms the base or bottom of the basket. these they make very expediciously and dispose off for a mear trifle.”

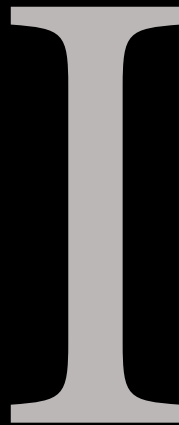
– Meriwether Lewis



CAPE DIS

Fort Stevens was built on the southern lip of the Columbia River during the Civil War to provide strong points near the Canadian border, to strengthen American claims against the British on the opposite side. It was shelled ineffectually by a Japanese submarine during World War II, but these days it attracts mostly hikers, bikers, and history enthusiasts who come to explore a paved (and unpaved) trail network that meanders past still-buried bunkers and pillboxes and artillery emplacements built for a war that never came.

The *Peter Iredale*, a sailing barque that ran aground in 1906, still sits in the sand of the park and is probably one of the most-photographed shipwrecks of all time. She is a relic tossed ashore after



wrecking herself on the Columbia River Bar, the so-called Graveyard of the Pacific, infamous for Dooming thousands of ships to thier watery tombs. The lack of a river delta has created a network of shoals here that produce enormous standing waves, walls of water created when the full-blast of the river current meets the permanent rage of the ocean waves.

The bar is among the reasons the search for a Northwest Passage was so difficult – aside from the fact that it didn't exist – as ship after ship foundered at the mouth of the river and thus failed to explore inland. Commerce was ultimately the driving factor behind all of Western exploration of the New World, but the Columbia Bar is where that force met its only match, the untamed

power of Nature.

Nearby is a replica of Fort Clatsop, the place where Lewis and Clark and the *Corps of Discovery* spent the winter of 1805-06 among the Clatsop Indians before they made their return journey to St. Louis. Shortly before the bicentennial of the fort, the original replica accidentally burned to the ground. This gave archaeologists an opportunity to sift through the ashes for more corroborative proof that the replica had been built in the right spot, but in spite of this second chance they have been stymied – the climate of the area is such that all traces of the original fort seem to have been obliterated. It was last recognizable in the mid-Nineteenth Century, around the time Fort Stevens was being built.

Astoria, the second-largest city in Oregon one hundred years ago, was built on pilings on an island just inside the six-mile-wide mouth of the river. Patrons visiting a downtown saloon could sip suds and then step outside to drop a fishing line through the holes in the boardwalk. A speed limit was enforced for vehicles pulled by draft animals – six miles per hour on city streets, four on roads built on pilings. When bicyclists came along, state law required them to stop, dismount, and wait for horse-drawn carriages to pass before returning to their bikes. One overwrought newspaper editor even proposed that cyclists be forced to remove their caps until the encounter was over.

Every autumn the rolling swamplands near the jetty on the south side of the river – what the river has instead of a delta – is peppered with huddled human forms in hoodie sweatshirts. These are mostly teenagers and college kids seeking hallucinogenic mushrooms of the

genera *psilocybe*, a group of species that very closely resemble the hyper-toxic death caps and destroying angels that grow alongside them. Local paramedics and park rangers can recount stories of misadventure, of shroomers who don't know their shrooms and end up with their stomachs pumped or worse, of psychedelic death hikes.*

Even those who know what they are doing are often so paranoid that they shy away from vehicles, hide in bushes and so on. The dunes and swamps and tidal flats become points of fear and loathing, of potential Doom. In dark clothing and with hoods pulled up they sometimes remind me of waves of immigrants from Mexico and points beyond, creeping and stumbling in single files across the Arizona desert, with jugs of water rather than paper or plastic collecting bags. There is the same atmosphere of weird apprehension and the same lack of good cover in the landscape.

SILHOUETTES ON A BEACH

For all the reasons to go to the beach, human behavior once there is disturbingly uniform. The sand and the

* Footnote: There are numerous poisonous mushrooms and berries on the Oregon Coast, so care should always be taken. What is required is a knowledge of Nature, which requires significant time spent within it. Numerous guides are available that will help legal shroomers distinguish the tasty from the traumatic. Personally, I've never much liked the taste of mushrooms, but they are among my favorite photo subjects.



sea act as social levelers of a sort. Sand, especially to a photographer with a camera in his hands, is a universal nuisance. When wet it clings to all surfaces and is confoundingly skilled at invading the most hard-to-clean parts of a camera body or lens. When dry it goes airborne in a stiff breeze to discover eyes, ears, exposed skin, and other sensitive places.

But the real villain – or hero, depending on one’s point of view – is the sneaker wave. These are relatively rare but statistically inevitable waves that can run considerably further up on a beach upon breaking than the average wave – average, that is, for a given beach and a given set of conditions. They occur all the time regardless of tide level, but are especially pernicious on flat beaches at low tide. They tend to result when two or more waves become “stacked” and there is no outgoing wave to slow their combined progress. While sand

is a danger to camera equipment, sneaker waves are deadly.*

Panic ripples through a cluster of human forms scattering from an oncoming sneaker wave. Those nearest skitter away without thought, while those on safer ground turn to watch, to cheer, to mock. The little jump and instinctive flight of the about-to-be-soaked, the shaking shoulders, involuntary giggling, and gestures of relief of those who make it – or the chagrin of wet shoes and pantlegs of those who don’t – the whole

* Footnote: Shortly after I arrived on the coast a series of sneaker wave-related camera incidents convinced me to always leave my camera equipment in a backpack on my back or strapped securely around my neck, or stashed as far up the beach as possible in a dune or on the ledge of a beach cliff. When a sneaker wave comes – and it will always come – there will never be enough time to save both my equipment and myself.

transaction repeats itself with each new group of unsuspecting silhouettes.

Especially Fun to watch as silhouettes are the young urban hipsters who travel in tight packs of two or three elegant couples, dressed in solid metrosexual black and driving pricey solid black cars. After dinner but before hitting the bars to heckle the local bands, they

stop at the beach for a sunset stroll. They move gracefully with all the good cheer of money and youth. They never seem to look at anyone but themselves. They throw their heads back when they laugh.

From up the beach I see the end of their practiced austerity arriving in the form of a triple-decker sneaker wave. There is plenty of time to watch it unfold, but I am helpless to warn them over the roar of the crash-



ing waves. They are lost in their social moment anyway, and oblivious to the whims of the Pacific even as it is precisely those whims that make the stroll romantic.

When one of them finally sees the wave that will swamp them, their careful reserve evaporates like bubbles in the finest champaign. There are opportunities for chivalry, and opportunities lost – it's a free-for-all. The men are faster. They outrun the surge until they stop to look back shamefaced at the dates they've left behind, young women now not only fighting the heeled shoes they've stupidly worn to the beach, but the soggy skirts of their dresses as well.

The two of them who escape with their clothes still dry, I notice, are the two – a man and woman – who never bothered to keep their cool, who never looked back, who grasped the reductive power of the sneaker wave: that we all must run like ninnies or we will all surely be soaked like ninnies.



My silhouette and my shadow are close cousins. On a South Coast beach I stand with my back to the sea an hour before sunset as I wait for the sunlight to arrive more obliquely and provide an illumination that will probe the nooks and crannies on the eroded monolith in front of me, low angles striking the enormous sea rock to reveal the rock's surface bumps and flaws. Today the sun throws my shadow at the base of the rock as usual but there is a second mysterious shadow, larger, dimmer, and placed above the first on the side of the rock. Squinting back toward the sun to discover its source, I see a glaring patch of sand that is slow to drain of water. The direct sunlight is casting the lower shadow as expected, but the second shadow is caused by the light bounc-

ing off the wet sand, lighting me up from below, creating on the rock two of me.

Deep in the dunes – on another day but at roughly the same time of day and season – a thick stand of beach grass draws my eye. As I line up my shot, my own shadow creeps into the bottom of the frame like a spy. The result is a sort of self-portrait of the photographer at

work, which at such moments becomes virtually indistinguishable from play.

P RETEEN GANGSTAS

On the northern lip of the Columbia River – as a dry and hilly extension of the Columbia bar itself, that implacable threat to generations of vessels – lies a piece of land that I liken to a mini-Yellowstone for the abundance of light, life, history, and geophysical beauty to be found within its capes and swamps and coves and hollows.

William Clark climbed to the top of this point of land and describes it like this in his journal: “from this point

I beheld the grandest and most pleasing prospects which my eyes ever surveyed, in my frount a boundless Ocean, to the N. and N. E. the coast as far as my sight Could be extended, the Seas rageing with emence wave and brakeing with great force from the rocks of Cape Disapointment as far as I could See to the N.W.”

Here the land is overtaking the sea and claiming more space for itself. On the scale of decades, sand is swallowing the sea-battered rocks offshore and turning them into mountains by replacing the water with solid ground, new territory created by nothing but time (and the help of a nearby jetty, which is doing the grunt work).

The English would have preferred that the US-Canada border be set at the Columbia, which would have made the bridge at Astoria an international border crossing today, and rather than merely being in Washington State, Cape Disapointment and the significant history that took place there would now be commemorated in a Canadian provincial or national park.

Cape Disappointment – as ironically named a place as I know, at least as seen from land on a summer day – is the point at which Lewis and Clark, explorers of a continent, finally ran out of continent to explore. A tiny boardwalk at similarly confoundingly named Waikiki Beach, a small





sheltered cove near the Columbia's north jetty, illustrates the story of Lewis and Clark's expedition from St. Louis – with careful recognition of the Indian tribes encountered along the way – and ends, appropriately, in the sands of the beach.

On the first sunny Saturday of spring I am exploring on foot – wearing shorts pulled from a near-inaccessible corner under my bed and still reeking of winter's mothballs, a new safari-style leather hat and sunglasses on my head, walking stick in hand, my camera slung around my neck. I grin goofily as I walk. I am aware that I am grinning goofily and I do not care. After months of cold, dark soggiess and howling hurricane winds I have completed the first lengthy dry-shod hike of the season, at last consummated the fantasy that kept me going. So I grin goofily and waft through this first sunny Saturday of spring like a long-held sigh.

I am following a road that will return me to my part of the campground, a relatively remote loop in which I am for the moment the only camper. The beaches, parking lots, and hiking trails are filling fast with families, but this road leads nowhere particularly Fun. It is not a road through the middle of Nowhere, precisely, but one that wanders about through the landscape with no apparent purpose, perhaps one of Nowhere's service roads – the kind of road one follows to see where it will lead and for no other reason.



I hear them around a bend in the road before I see them. When they come into view I see that they are not men, or are men only in the loosest possible sense. I count about six of them, boys of twelve or thirteen, not quite on the cusp of manhood, still firmly in late boyhood. They are the age at which boys traveling in tight packs – as they most frequently do – tend to look the most awkward: about half have endured the first growth spurt of adolescence, and about half haven't.

Even from a distance their clothes scream corporate logos at me. I can recognize the shapes of companies I've seen before – those of sports teams, soft drinks,

shoe companies – and those I haven't – names and silk-screened images of what I assume are rappers or comedians, all of whom smirked or glared at the photographer who took the mugshot their parent companies chose to use to advertise them to the world. The boys are clad in attitudes dreamed up in boardrooms, but I can't criticize too much – it was the same when I was their age. Some of the logos haven't even changed.

They carry themselves toward me down the road seemingly drunk on one such attitude, an attitude they must have agreed upon prior to going for a walk so thoroughly does it penetrate their body language. They are defensively hunched forward, shoulders and arms tensed

and steps deliberate, as if expecting big trouble at any moment. Ready to fight, they scowl at everything they see so severely that one might suspect that they are secret agents, the menace of the suburbs, no-good preteens of Doom – but for the somewhat girlish giggling I’ve just heard coming around the bend on this access road to Nowhere.

It is easy for me to diagnose, or so I suppose: they have just been discussing a new (or new-to-them) aspect of their culture – given the age and gender, I would guess it was something violent, misogynistic, or morbid, or all three – and upon seeing my silhouette in the road have adopted a posture involuntarily and en masse of hardened criminals (or if not of criminals per se then at least of roughnecks who associate with them).

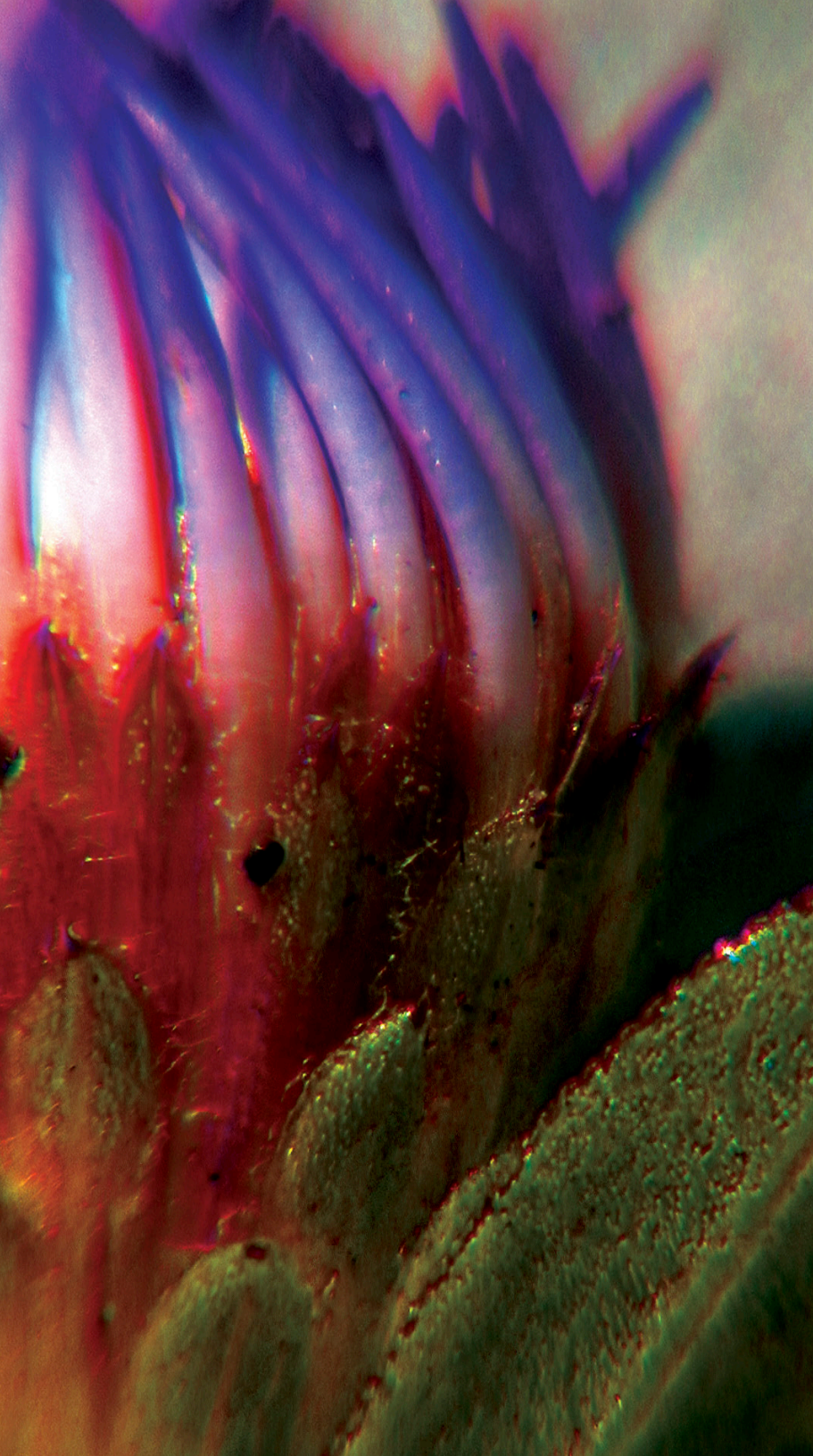
I recognize it because I remember it. They are a group of friends from a junior high school hanging out together outside of school. At a certain age – these boys



are right in the center of it – the only reliably universal connection many children have with one another is via pop culture, or more precisely, the common consumption of it. Now, free from the confines of school and parents, the temptation is to utterly indulge. I understand the urge: there is no way we will run into anyone we know here, so we can be anyone we want.

I walk on with my head downturned to avoid squashing the various slugs, newts, frogs, salamanders, centipedes, woolly bears, and other things crawling underfoot, things that slither or ooze out of the ground to be squashed on first sunny Saturdays like this one. Banana slugs as banana peels, or as Clark expresses it: “Snales without Covers is Common.”

I forget the boys are even there until they are upon me so silent have they become, perhaps in the mistaken belief that silence is menacing. I look up and they are still scowling and awkwardly stiff at the shoulders as they



advance, as if ready to push me off the side of the road if they have to, if the situation escalates to that. It is probably not the right time to tell them about the cute bunny I just saw.

I look up, but I do so still grinning goofily, as helpless to change my attitude as they are. As I step aside to let them pass on this spacious road, one of the taller boys dares to make eye contact with me. In a flash the mask of mindless defiance clears from his face, and he smiles in return. Then the smile is gone, the boy's eyes dart down and to his right to see if his momentary lapse has been noticed. It hasn't. His shoulders re-hunch and they pass by without comment, their united front of toughness still intact, so far as they know.

We could be anyone, but in this passing moment the boy and I have managed to make a real, albeit fleeting, human connection. It is a genuine expression of strangers in Nature, two people able for a nearly invisible moment to ignore age, race, and a tangle of cultural differences to communicate something recognizable above the din of calculated messages the logos scream: it's a lovely day. For a moment the beauty of the place trumps the crap and it triumphs over it, revealing the carefully focus-grouped attitudes for what they are: nothing.

There is danger approaching them, a cliff over which their hormones are about to hurl them. They will grow stupider before they

grow smarter, and they will wallow for a year or two in a fetid swamp of machismo. Some boys will get stuck in that place for much of their adult lives, emerging into maturity only slowly and only when the weight of maintaining such a front wears them out.

But most will cross the line eventually, exchange old insecurities for new ones, and be quickly too overwhelmed with the work of survival and even personal growth to afford the macho charade they are imposing on one another today. There is no point in trying to explain to them that they will grow up, that a walk in a beautiful park on a beautiful day with close friends is the kind of thing that happens to adults only rarely and with much effort.

For now they are all immune. Maybe they are right to strut.

They are play-acting. It is pure fantasy and they are twelve. I forgive them. Still, I have to wonder about myself and my friends at that age: is that really how we looked?

A DVENTURE S P O R T S

A stiff northwest gale pushes a dozen kite-surfers – surfers propelled by parachute-like “power” kites – south along the beach. They put in from the end of Manzanita’s main street, riding the backwash of wind as it filters over Neahkahnie Mountain, swirling them clockwise toward the sea. It would appear to be an impromptu, amphibious kite festival, and a migratory one at that. They tack into the wind until two dozen feet from shore, where the beach forces them to



turn at last and ride with it. The force of the turnabout threatens to rip the sails from their hands, but then they are never truly in control anyway; from this point until they decide to turn back, their nylon sails will make them playthings of the winds and waves.

Even from shore the event is exhilarating: a big comma in the sky – and a detached period below and a little to one side of center representing a human head – rides the flat spaces between the waves, a human figure taking on impossible speed before the run-up, the moment the figure vaults over the tip of the wave – I swear I can see the legs bend in preparation for the jump, like an Olympic ski-jumper – and the orbit, the moment of loss of gravity, and the seconds that pass while the figure is airborne and when the ocean is hushed enough to hear it, the delayed shriek of human delight – and the splashdown on the other side of the wave where once again the snap-turn nearly disarms them.

One of the figures that has been paralleling my walk south from Manzanita has evidently given up. He waddles toward shore a little goofily, surfboard tucked under one arm while his other arm flails in the air as it grips the long bar to which his still-eager sail is attached. He motions me over to him with a wave of his wetsuit-bound head.

“My harness came loose,” he says. “Would you help me fix it?”

He guides me through a procedure involving lots of velcro, bungee cords, and metal clasps, shouting to me in the rough gale between gasps of air deep enough I can feel them. His arm wobbles like a wet, black noodle; his biceps are taut under his wetsuit and I imagine the exhaustion within.

“What’s it like out there?” I ask.

He has barely looked away from the sea since he beached himself; his sail, too, is trying to pull him back out. “There’s nothing like it,” he says between gasps. It’s as if it is the first time he’s ever searched for a metaphor. He eventually just shakes his head.

There is time for only one more comment before I finish the amateur repair work on his harness and he is bounding into the surf, to launch himself over a wave and kick his board into the air, a bit of flash presumably for my benefit. He is quickly a mere dot again, lost amid the rolling, crashing breakers, a mile or two from where I watch.

The comment is this: “This is the greatest adventure of my life.”

On a different day I watch two kiteless surfers riding a slow-rolling river between its two jetties. They catch the waves and ride them upriver, inland, before sliding to a graceful crash and floating back out to sea, ducking the incoming breakers – they get some extra rest on the return trip by floating with the river’s current instead of paddling – to catch a new wave at the mouth of the river. The waves, coming directly in at a ninety-degree angle, maintain their shapes and momentum unusually well in the center, making for very long if somewhat slow rides.

It is an odd sight to see men standing upright on the surface of a river, weirder somehow than watching the same thing at sea. For one thing, there is a backdrop immediately behind them in the form of mountains and houses – from a photographer’s perspective, the surfers

look like they simply shouldn't be there. Watching them has some weird chariot-race feel to it – as if I were an emperor in a booth on the jetty and they are racing in a aquatic hippodrome for my amusement. Laps completed during Roman chariot races were marked by dolphin figurines on a metal rod near the finish line that were tipped forward to show the number remaining. Here, they could be real dolphins.*

One of the charioteers waves to me when he sees me snapping shots from the jetty. He makes two close passes on well-rounded waves as I fire off several shots, but they are a disappointment. The day is cloudy and



while the jetty and distant mountains make for unexpected perspectives, the lumpy black rocks are visually uninspired, to say the least.

The Oregon “Beach Bill” has its roots in a piece of legislation signed in 1913 by Governor Oswald West – for whom a North Coast state park with a great surfing beach is named – and declaring all of the tidelands on the Oregon coast to be a public highway (because the beach was often the only feasible means of travel for people who lived there). The coast highway – what would become 101 – was completed in 1932, but the beach was still a back-up route kept relevant by the Mother Road’s frequent mudslides

and washouts.

In the summer of 1966 a developer in Cannon Beach built a fence around the beach adjacent to his hotel in

* Footnote: Dolphins are exceptionally rare on Oregon beaches, although I have seen a few. Most commonly they wash up on shore in corpse form, as do the remains of rather smallish sharks. Some are so decomposed and gnawed at by seagulls and hawks that it is hard to tell what they used to be by the time they are discovered.



order to create a private beach for his guests. By the following summer the beach bill was signed into law, and all property within sixteen vertical feet of the high tide line was declared public property.* The speed of the legislation is due partly to a television news director, who used a photograph that had been doctored to show the Oregon beachscape as it would look cluttered with fences, and the persuasive image swayed public opinion such that when the bill passed, it did so opposed by only three of sixty state representatives.

Along with a major effort by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Division in 1964 to create public access points at roughly every three miles along the three hundred and sixty-mile-long shoreline, The Beach Bill makes the entire expanse of the immediate coast available to everyone, for free. The law is fair – and wise, in a region eager for tourist dollars.

A man in a wetsuit pulls a child behind him through the surf on a small body board, back and forth about twenty times at high speed.

* Footnote: The need to enshrine the law in bulletproof legal language prompted a political show whereby the governor, Tom McCall – who in support of the bill had an opportunity to stand proudly on Oregon's picturesque beaches with surveying equipment, as their defender (and ended up no doubt a few extra votes richer for his effort) – starred in a high drama that also illuminates the difficulty of defining the boundaries of the Edge itself, at which precise points on the maps the private should become the public. The final law approximates the vegetation line, which by 1966 was already overrun by European beachgrasses.

At a point when the action pauses for a few seconds, the child crawls off and begins walking up the beach to his mother without a word of thanks. The bewetsuited man, hood dangling sadly from the back of his neck, walks forlornly away after a stunned pause, pulling the board behind him, now emptied.

I watch three people plant a flag in the beach – number nine – and make a circle around it in the sand. With sand wedges, they pick what seems an arbitrary point and play the enormous sand trap according to the laws of real golf, marking balls, obeying the rules of honor. I watch one man waggle for about sixty seconds, never once allowing the head of the club to touch the sand, before topping his ball about twenty feet, rolling. I sympathize. When they are finished, they pick another arbitrary point and begin again to play hole number nine, a whole new way, whichever way they want.

Disk golf is popular in the Pacific Northwest, too. If golf is “a good walk spoiled,” then disk golf is a nature hike gone horribly awry. The courses are just like real golf courses, but instead of greens and cups there is a basket waiting at the end of each hole, and the goal is to throw a frisbee-like disk into the basket under par. The sport is as absurd as it sounds, and that’s a good thing.

Anyone with a vacant field could build a disk golf course. Since the ground itself isn’t much involved there is no need to maintain anything but the baskets, which are nothing but hoops on posts with loose chains dangling from them (which help to catch the disk if a shot is on-target, like the crash net on an aircraft carrier).

Another popular preoccupation is geocaching, that is, the caching of objects in various geographical locations. Participants follow GPS coordinates and other clues to locate widely scattered boxes in which the items are stored, and usually sign a book and add or remove an item in the box, to let others know they were there. There is no point, really, but the idea is that as long as you are in the area anyway, you may as well be looking for something. The boxes are often hidden in the crotches of tree limbs or between rocks or underneath trail bridges, hidden in plain sight like Easter eggs.*

MONKEY PUZZLE TREE

On a soggy February morning I get a phone call from my sister to tell me our father has passed away. My brother called the night before to prepare me – our father has been sick for several months.

Ten or fifteen minutes later a park ranger knocks on my trailer door. Someone has reserved my campsite

* Footnote: I had never heard of geocaching before exploring the Northwest, but the activity seems to be spreading to other parts of the nation. An article in a South Carolina newspaper about the outlawing of geocaching describes it as an “invasive recreation” and refers to it as a “practice or sport...” The language suggests a protective bill against a form of recreation becoming popular on the other side of the nation, wielding moral indignation to agitate against an activity about as harmful as nose-picking. Here, clearly illustrated, is the difference between the East Coast and the West Coast, the different attitudes toward the use of public space for the purposes of individual Fun, emphatically illustrated. The bill was quietly slipped through the state legislature’s one hundred and sixteenth session, and passed without comment.

for this evening, and I will have to move. This kind of thing happens sometimes if one travels full-time. During the busy seasons it is often difficult to find sites that are available for more than a few nights, meaning that I must move over and over.*

I begin to ready my trailer for the short, sad trip. I won't be leaving the campground but moving a rig as large as mine any distance at all requires the same

amount of unavoidable work – disconnecting cables and stuffing furniture and tarps and awnings into basement compartments, hitching and rehitching the trailer and deploying the screen room for the cats, fighting with slide-outs that have been broken since Tennessee and still require manual operation with a handcrank: the overhead of travel. I'm up to my ankles in winter's sloppiest slime, utility hoses caked with mud, moss, and slugs, but I am oddly relieved to have someplace else – anyplace else – to put my attention on a black morning.

* Footnote: Once at a beachside campground in South Carolina I had to move my trailer to the neighboring site about twenty feet away. It would have been easy but for a nasty tangle of live oaks between the two sites, looking, as live oaks in the Deep South usually do, as ancient and stolidly immobile as a seastack. It was like trying to guide a bowling ball safely through a house of cards. It took three hours.

My father and I hadn't been especially close. Some kind of rift had developed between us, although we had moved quickly past this in the final months of his life, the available time being short. I got to see him a last time – my one and only airplane trip during my years





of travel – two weeks before he died, two weeks today.

My father was a spectacular gardener all his life. He excavated koi ponds and nurtured ferns in cypress swamps, raised gazebos in beds of exotic flowers. He appreciated beauty, but he also had an active scientific curiosity befitting a surgeon. He collected and planted exotic species from around the world and concocted hybridization and grafting schemes – melding two apple varieties together, for instance, or grafting two entirely different species, or trimming yew shrubs to look like ducks. I think many of these experiments were per-

formed merely to see how the plants would react. *

Mixed with these or consigned to a garden of their own were the vegetables. He weeded and fertilized religiously, sprayed for bugs, exulted over basketball-sized rutabagas. I don't think it was ever an issue of competition for him. In fact, I think the opposite; it was exactly the non-competitive nature of Nature that appealed to my father, that one must take what he finds sometimes, and, after countless setbacks, disasters and triumphs, droughts, floods, infestations and simple accidents, that Nature always randomizes her bounties on whims.

* Footnote: Many of the species my father planted in his gardens – both those in Indiana and in Haiti – were not indigenous to the western hemisphere. This is how many invasive species in the United States and elsewhere are first unleashed, as accidental vagabonds in Nature due to gardener irresponsibility. So far as I know none of my father's imports has yet run amok, but many are surely still growing where he planted them.



My father dabbled in photography, but had largely given it up by the time I was born. The proof is in the pictures – there are copious surviving images of my older siblings as young children, but the number dwindles down to a relative few of me, the youngest. At the same time, though, the number of stained-glass works, oil paintings, and aquaria grew – my father didn't lose his creative impulses, he just transferred them away from photography.

As a doctor he was often invited to attend medical conferences as a speaker or as an attendee. The ones he attended, if charted on a map, would be uncannily close to many world-famous gardens, those of an



Oriental style built in Europe or the Americas being his favorite.

His greatest passion in life was the work he did in Haiti as a medical missionary. He began traveling to Haiti in the Groovy Seventies as a young general surgeon, and he often took the rest of us along. Over the years he returned again and again before at last committing to the directorship of a clinic in the coastal countryside – in a few months the hospital will be renamed in his honor.

It was not the beginning of an obsession, but an early sign of an obsession already entrenched and bound only to grow more so. I think he always intended to be a medical missionary – a bug that burrowed under his skin during his experience in Japan, on the back lines of the Vietnam War, and hatched its eggs in Bangladesh, where I spent the first two years of my life – and he had been looking for a Home, a proper place to put his lifelong passion.

In Haiti he found it.



warming swallow of banana-flavored rum, my first-ever taste of alcohol. From a patio behind the distillery my father distributes all the coins in his pocket to his four children. We throw them down a one-hundred foot chasm to impoverished Haitian children who scurry after each, dodging between trees and crawling on their bellies like lizards. My father enjoys watching them, to see which get to the coins the quickest.

The mountains loom to one side and the ocean to the other, but otherwise Haiti and Oregon aren't much alike – sugarcane and papaya replace gorse, dry washes and bald hills replace pocket gorges and gushing, misty mountain falls.

I try to catch some of the clouds in a glass jar to take Home with me when our father takes us into the high mountains one day, wending us through vertiginous passes to a lush haven atop the Coast Range of Haiti, completely above the clouds where there are still enough trees to constitute a forest in a nation deeply deficient of them.

At a distillery, I am given a small paper cup with a gut-

It seems somehow cruel to me.

“Why?” my father asks. “I’m giving them everything I have with me. Why shouldn’t I have fun doing it?”

I don’t have an answer, of course, but the rum that warmed my stomach in the cool air is now turning it.

We eat dinner at a nice restaurant in the mountains, in a romantic courtyard alive with the tinkling of fountains and waterfalls – some real and some fake. The atmosphere has cleared and phantasms of stars – cut by the startling paleness of the Milky Way – are just visible through the candlelight. An enormous iguana prowls between the palms and ferns, and parrots and cockatiels and other birds of paradise chatter from perches.

It is a place to which I will return in my memory in years to come when I want to remember a place soothing and warm, when I'm down.

A dark, twisty shadow mesmerizes me – I can't look away. It looks like an articulated robotic version of a tree. I circle it a few times and it is utterly unique from each angle. A small scorpion clings to the trunk.

"Dad, what kind of tree is this?" I ask him.

He looks up from a dinner of banana fritters and rice and beans with goat meat. He has already identified several other plants for me – a member of the cabbage family with gong-sized leaves as full of holes as Swiss cheese, a subtropical sundew that eats insects – but I hope that I've stumped him with this otherworldly thing in front of me, a spindly but immovable alien species that reaches out for me in the dark.

"That tree is from South America," my father says. "It's called a monkey puzzle tree."

A HIT ON AN OCTOPUS

I nod and smile at a teenage girl and her parents as they pass me on a postcard-perfect summer evening at the beach, in the bonus hours of daylight. I walk on for a few hundred feet before glancing back a few times,

before stopping completely and pivoting on the spot to watch them.

They are approaching a scene I've just left, a tableau involving a dozen agitated seagulls and crows, much disorder, and lots of incessant squawking. As she approaches, the girl runs ahead of her parents

and slips gracefully into a bird-like trot, a bounding, skipping rendition of a seagull in flight. Her outstretched arms flap in time with her steps. She caws as she nears them and the gulls and crows begin to scatter.

The birds are drawn by the gory remains of an exceedingly deceased octopus. Far from the most compre-



hensible creature while alive and in the sea, an octopus dead and on land becomes an awkward puddle of miscellaneous innards, tentacles, and assorted octo-stuff, and a spectacle usually reserved for nightmares after the crows and gulls have spent half a day pulling sinewy globs free, feasting on what's left, helping it decompose. Watching the girl's carefree approach from my point up the beach, then, is like watching a prophecy unfold.

As the birds clear away, still bothered and fuming, from her loopy bird dance the girl unleashes a very girlish scream and halts in her tracks, legs going rigid with surprise and horror ten feet from the corpse. She covers her mouth with her hands.

"What is it?" her mother asks her.

"It's an octopus!" she yells back.

"A *what?*"

"An *octopus!*"

I keep walking. A few moments later I look back one last time, to see the acts of consolation and the explanations about the cycles of life in the sea and the inherent cruelty of Nature. Instead, the father holds a camera to his eye, shooting down at the scene while his daughter leans into the shot from above, mugging toward the camera, flashing gang signs and smirking as if she were responsible, as if she had made the hit.

I will never see the resulting image, but I have seen the moment itself, which is a very different thing. The photo can lie, but the moment happens as it happens and is then gone. And here is how it played out in front of me in silhouette, in the evening hours at the Edge of

the wine-dark sea.

“The old Clatsop chief arrived with some excellent salmon and the meat of a large biche. There came with him a man about thirty years of age, who has extraordinarily dark red hair, and is the supposed offspring of a ship that was wrecked within a few miles of the entrance of this river many years ago. Great quantities of beeswax continue to be dug out of the sand near this spot, and the Indians bring it to trade with us.... They bring us frequently lumps of beeswax fresh out of the sand which they collect on the coast to the S., where the Spanish ship was cast away some years ago and the crew all murdered by the natives.”

– Alexander Henry, representative of the Northwest Company in
Astoria, 1813-14



STRATEGIES FOR MOVEMENT

Nehalem Bay State Park has an airstrip and a “fly-in camp.” If you own a small passenger plane, you can land on the runway and taxi to your campsite, or very close to it. There is also a horse camp, which reminds me of the 4-H fairs I remember from childhood, the ammonia stench and soft leather of the stables: cowboy daydreams.

Chunks of birds, pieces of wings, feet and beaks and rain-sodden piles of anonymous feathers line a little strip of gravel footpath between the bay and the edge of the runway. When gulls and other birds are chopped up by airplane propellers, campers in the



campground can hear the sudden sputter of a struggling engine, suggesting an even greater tragedy might be at hand.

Fortunately this rarely happens, but the suggestion of possibility is enough to unnerve. For pilots taking off southward into the prevailing wind there too is the promise of shallow water in which to crash, and a field of thin dunes to the north of the runway in case the landing runs long.

That is, I can imagine worse places in which to crash.

On an otherwise cloudless day, a perpetual cloud sits atop Neahkahnie Mountain dribbling strands of fog downhill between the treetops. It evaporates into Nothingness before reaching the foot of the mountain, like a gaseous backlit waterfall above a bartender's nook at a fancy nightclub.

Cresting the top of the grassy dunes of Nehalem Beach never fails to give me a thrill of a sort. The tops of these simmering hills, alive and hissing with the slightest breeze, is one of those surefire places – or rather, a string of them, from the isolation of the north jetty of the Nehalem River to the welcome mats and mailboxes of the beach houses at the edge of Manzanita itself – that never, ever lets me down.

The land between the campground and the jetty is like a hedgemaze. Deer and elk have cut new trails between the paths made by decades of horse traffic, a million hooves having trampled the paths to a slushy, deep well of sand that remains cool to bare feet a few inches below the surface because the walls of beachgrass and Scotch broom are too tall to allow light to filter through them. Just like a hedgemaze, there are countless ways



to become lost.

A herd of Roosevelt elk roams the peripheries of the bay and disappears into the wilderness of the sand spit in summer, when the campground is noisy, or into the mountains. In winter they frequent the campground like the bison and moose of Yellowstone. They were once waiting at my campsite when I arrived; I had to wait for them to wander off before I could park.

The bay is Home to a plethora of beach logs in various states of nudity that get pulled into the bay during high tides. Many of them are the remains of clearcuts – logs rejected for one reason or another and left

to tumble into the sea during the winter landslides, slides precipitated by the clear-cutting itself. There are also plenty of ball-like root networks that terminate in cleanly shorn stumps: the leftovers of mass decapitations.

There are coyotes around the bay, too. Like coyotes everywhere, they often go off all at once late at night, the yodels and howls that in many parts of The West almost make up for the lack of fireflies, the weird hollering of the wild that create equally otherworldly sense



memories. There is always a dark side: one day out of the blue I hear sudden yowling in the middle of the afternoon, a gunshot that echoes across the bay, the brief, panicked yips of a baby coyote, more gunshots, and then more silence.

It seems to consist largely of the third and fourth and fifth Homes of the affluent who spend their winters in places far sunnier, like Mexico or Florida. The center of Manzanita on a winter's evening reminds me of my Midwestern hometown, in the aftermath of a blizzard, in the dead of the darkest night. Electric candles glimmer in the shop windows and I think of Christmases and cocoa.

I stumble up the beach in a winter's mid-afternoon gale for a cup of homemade chicken noodle soup and sticky potatoes to warm my innards, and wash it down with a cold Jones blue bubble-gum soda.* Manzanita: where at the corner market as they are bagging my groceries they ask if I am walking, because they know I like to carry my bags home on the beach. I say I am, and they automatically double-bag for me.

Still it rarely works, thanks to my bare-foot-in-the-surf perambulations. By the time I get home a hole or two has always appeared, the paper bags – the only bags

* Footnote: A Seattle beverage maker. On their label it says "independent since '96."

otherwise strong enough to survive the journey, and later to become starter fuel for my campfires – having been victimized by splashback.

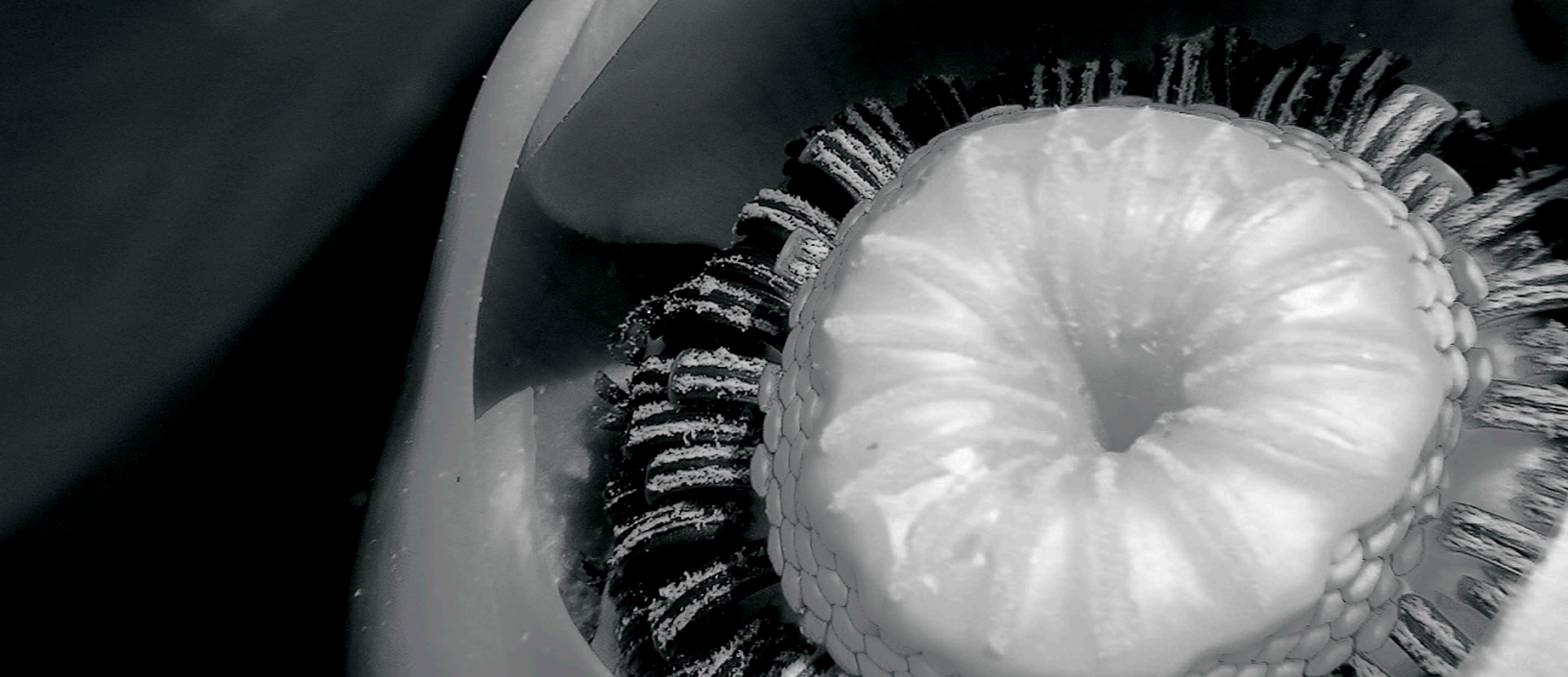
Beeswax from a long-lost shipwreck continues to wash up on the beaches near Nehalem Bay. The wax originated in Southeast Asia – guessing exactly where is a local sport – and the trade galleon that brought it was wrecked probably in the late Seventeenth or early Eighteenth Century: we'll probably never know for sure.

Accounts from before the dawn of the Twentieth Century suggest the wax had already been buried under ten feet of sand. Observers noted then – before the modern jetty was built – that the land was growing seaward and burying the deposits of beeswax, a process that has only continued in the years since. In other words, there might still be plenty of wax preserved in the improvised solidity of the sand spit. There are also accounts of it washing up a few miles upriver of the bay, where it has been pushed by high tides.

In all sobriety, it is unlikely in the extreme that I will ever find a chunk of the beeswax – the ground having been worked over and churned by generations of the curious – which only makes the prospect more enjoyable to entertain. Moreover, manila galleons – riding low in the water on the prevailing winds and currents into the North Pacific before rolling slowly down the coast to New Spain, overburdened and falling apart – traded off this shore for a quarter of a millennium, along with innumerable smaller, more localized traders.

Wrecked people and objects have been washing up here for a long, long time.





D. B. COOPER'S MONEY

On November 24, 1971, a man calling himself Dan Cooper hijacked a Boeing 727 between Portland and Seattle, claiming to be carrying a bomb. In Seattle he demanded two-hundred thousand dollars and allowed all passengers but the flight crew to disembark, and ordered the plane to be flown to Mexico. At some point, Dan Cooper – to be known by the press as D. B., after a garbling of the facts of the case – jumped out of the low and slow-flying jet with two parachutes, and disappeared into the chilly Northwest night.

It is not the man or his motives that most interest me. A guy jumping alone out of a jet airplane is one

thing, a guy jumping with two hundred thousand dollars something else. Without his ill-gotten money, the whole legend would be little more than an absurd stunt of a hapless daredevil or a weird, especially mild act of domestic terrorism. The suitcase bulging with cash is what makes this story resonant for the public at large, to none moreso than those of us who hang out here where it fell – somewhere.

Not only is it inherently valuable in itself – assuming the twenty dollar bills are still recognizable as such – but the real worth of D. B. Cooper's Money has only gone up with time, appreciating and compounding interest the way only an undiscovered artifact of history can.

Like the suggested possibility of encountering Big Foot whilst stumbling about in the high forests, the possibil-

ity – if it has been not only entertained but done so with a healthy dose of skepticism, with an acknowledgment of the indisputable facts and length of the odds but without any other degree of prejudice – that one might come across a time-battered Samsonite heavy with bricks of bound-up cash while slogging through coastal swamps and over grassy dunes makes the stumbling and the slogging more Fun. It is an imagined fantasy that can be lain over “reality” for a cheap thrill, like a game, just for Fun. Here is a chance to define the value of fantasy for its own sake: escape.

The game requires the same suspension of disbelief required by fiction combined with enough knowledge of the facts around the legend to avoid slipping off into irrational or delusional voids. This is no place either for utter skeptics – who are missing a perfect opportunity for imaginative play – or fanatical believers – who often are so passionate about the legend or so committed to their favorite theories that they end up committing a

similar sin. This is instead a game for those with just enough skepticism to derive pleasure from the intellectual challenge of trying to suppress it and curiosity, and perhaps even boredom, to play it with enthusiasm.

The D. B. Cooper case is not the only one involving a literal treasure on the Oregon Coast. Legends of artifacts left behind by earlier explorers and the lost booty of shipwrecks abound here – buried chests on mountaintops and hidden caches in sea caves. Gold, semiprecious stones, and diamonds have been found on beaches and other metals and gems in the mountains of the Coast Range.

The wrecked manila galleon that continues to supply chunks of beeswax comes again to mind. For years the wax was collected by local Indians – when they weren’t out gathering dentalia shells, or harvesting whale blubber – and sold to white traders and settlers, who used

it for candles and as a sealant, the abandoned Asian beeswax turned to a trade item once again at the confluence of American and Native American history.

And there’s this: rather than storing valuables in deposit boxes at banks, some older Japanese people wary of banks keep their valuables in locked and sealed safeboxes stashed around their houses. Along with





much else, some of these that have made the trip across the ocean will begin to wash up on Northwest beaches in the coming years as a result of the 2011 tsunami.

People here can be forgiven for hoping – some evidently even *expecting* – to discover a literal fortune waiting on or in the ground.

As it happens, a portion of D. B. Cooper's money has already been found. Several years after the heist, three bundles of twenty dollar bills that matched the serial numbers of some of the stolen money were discovered buried in the sandy banks of the Columbia River; a boy camping with his family discovered them and handed them over to the FBI. (After identifying them, the FBI returned some of the bills, and he later sold fifteen of them for thirty-seven thousand dollars.)

There is a tendency for things to drift downstream from Portland and then become trapped between the competing salt and freshwater currents that slosh over the river's sandy bar, to be deposited along the jetties and bluffs. I once discovered a Tribe of Israel patch torn from a jacket – it had washed up with a carpet of plastic bottles and styrofoam on the Columbia's southern bank – that probably originated in the upriver metro sprawl, but could easily have been adrift for years only to be pushed slightly inland by a storm. I still have it, stuffed in a kitchen junk drawer – I am greeted by the black, green, and yellow of the Jamaican flag embroidered on it every time I look for a toothpick or spare dime.

That the money was found in the Columbia –

perhaps having been dumped there by one of its many feeder streams – suggests that the rest of it and perhaps the intact suitcase itself may have floated out to sea. It is possible that the money found in 1980 may have been taken out by Cooper and stashed on his person, a few bundles stuffed into a pocket as a precaution in case he lost the suitcase in the jump. If so, the suitcase and money may still be out there somewhere – on any coastline in the world – still floating or washed up on some shore, maybe a shore nearby, maybe buried in the shifting sands where I find myself today.

The game really is one of faith. The search for – or more precisely the vague and hazy hope of stumbling across – D. B. Cooper's money requires both a recognition of the virtually impossible odds and a tiny, in-

finitesimal respect for the tiny, infinitesimal exception – that even if the odds were one in a hundred-billion, the “one” can't be completely ignored. A willingness to entertain the extreme remoteness of the chance is such a small thing that it is like a key that unlocks the door, like a shibboleth, like a password.

It could happen.

P SYCHOTIC BREAK- DOWN



I arrive at a beach campground in Washington state that I have never visited before, having scored reservations for a nine-night stay in the only site in the campground for which such a long stay was possible. I have come this far north on a whim conceived in the depths of winter and hatched in mid-spring, a sudden and uncontrollable urge to see a place I've never seen before. It is an itch I don't think I'll ever again be able to resist scratching. But this time I've rolled the

dice on campsite selection, as I often must. I could end up with almost anything.

What I end up with turns out to be *primo*.*

* Footnote: I owe my primo site to my mad computer skillz. Both Oregon's and Washington's state park reservation systems are available online. When someone cancels their reservation for a site, eventually the system must be updated. A determined – some might say obsessive – checker of the website can snipe such spots as they become available. Given the speed with which this happens, most notably in the heart of the tourist season, I can see I'm not the only traveler to have discovered this trick. My fellow campers and I compete for these sites from under the anonymous cover of the internet, like submarines dogfighting under rules of radio silence. Oregon has recently implemented a system by which users can be notified by email when a site becomes available for the dates they have selected, but the sniping method is still faster. And so the war rages on, endless as the tides. (Sidenote to the footnote: An interesting thing happens when a rainy day occurs amidst a lengthy stretch of dry ones. Even though there is no guarantee it will be raining on the day in question, and even though it may be raining in Portland and perfectly dry here – which is common, as is its opposite – people see the rain falling and a spate of cancellations immediately follows, a Pavlovian response to living in the Northwest, evidently.)

My site is spectacular in the fuzzy and warm overcast light of mid-afternoon: not a tree or shrub stands between my site and miles of the widest beaches on the coast, which begin about two hundred feet off the starboard bow of my trailer once parked. For nine days I will be living a stone's throw from the very Edge itself. Most days I won't even put on sandals to go for a walk – I'll simply walk through the door and into the dunes.

The campers who arrive next day in the site next to mine seem to be lovely people – they smile and nod when I see them. They are a man and woman I take to be a married couple, although they may be siblings, or unrelated altogether. I'll never figure it out for certain.

Though our loop of the campground is truly beautiful, the sites are rather close together and the lack of vegetation also means a lack of privacy. Their motorhome parallels my trailer, putting their firepit and



picnic table about twenty feet from the two large windows on that side of me. In such close quarters I can't help but witness the preparations for a picnic – cloth tablecloth on the table, red champagne flutes of real glass, a few batches of store-bought flowers and a platter of cheeses. When they are done they fidget and wait – for what I don't yet know, but they keep glancing toward the park entrance – but again they smile and wave as I pass them during my bare-footed trek through the shallow grassy dunes to the beach.*

The shockingly flat, vacant expanse of beach serves only to amplify the natural contrast typical of most Pacific beaches between vast swaths of visual space that appear at such distances to be utterly static and the relatively tiny pockets of space inhabited by humanity, identifiable chiefly by motion and color: a set of wind turbines whir atop a nearby hill, resembling an oddly discontinuous, industrialized version of Christ's crucifixion on Golgotha as depicted by medieval illuminists; four horsemen – on closer inspection they turn out to be *horsewomen* – ride hard along the high tide line, past me in a blur and down the shore, out of sight; and an orgiastic flicker of color three or four miles up the beach – resolved through a telephoto lens – is not a mirage of religious ecstasy but the wildfire-like tails of box kites fluttering in straight-line winds more persistent than any I've seen, wind so steady it can almost be ignored. The largest kites must be at least one hun-

* Footnote: Many of these swooning clumps of beachgrass shouldn't even be here. Grasses from Europe were deliberately introduced to stabilize the dunes decades ago, but have since conquered the Northwest Coast so successfully that it is hard to imagine photographs of the place without the picturesque green and tan patches.





dred feet long. I make a mental note to try my own – an entry level two-line stunt kite – before I leave the area.

The atmosphere when I return to my trailer is weirdly tense. My neighbor's guest has arrived.

He squints and stares at the side of my trailer with disgust and resentment, a hard scowl of contempt. The other two campers chat somewhat nervously about it with him, shrugging often. He looks like he is accepting an apology, smiling amicably enough in return, but the smile repeatedly fades when he glances at the

side of my trailer, regarding it as a teenager regards a new zit.

I can't know for sure why he doesn't like me. As an utter stranger I'm clueless as to what I might have done. It could be that it isn't me, necessarily, but my trailer. Not only is it squarely in the way between him and the ocean, but after another long, hard, wet winter it is only just now beginning to dry out completely. Masses of half-rotted leaves and twigs and crushed pinecones have concreted into dark patches on my roof, and bits of weather-stripping shorn free by raging winter winds have yet to be glued back into place. My trailer doesn't exactly resemble the Taj Mahal, it is true; but neither is



it a total sty – I’ve seen far worse, at least.

It could be that he is not annoyed at me per se but was expecting someone else to be here – I had, after all, obtained the site by way of someone else’s cancellation. It could be that his other friends ditched him.

But something about his scowl feels personal to me. He looks not at the wall of my trailer or even really at the trailer itself; he seems to be trying to see through the windows, glareless on this overcast day, at whom-ever may have dared to obstruct what he must have assumed would be a completely open view, more like

my site.*

He is impeccably dressed, and expensively. His snow-white hair is professionally manicured. More than anything he moves with the confidence – nee arrogance – of the extremely rich. I think what annoys him is what he must feel is a basic unfairness: I am alone and, judging by the state of the exterior of my trailer, some-

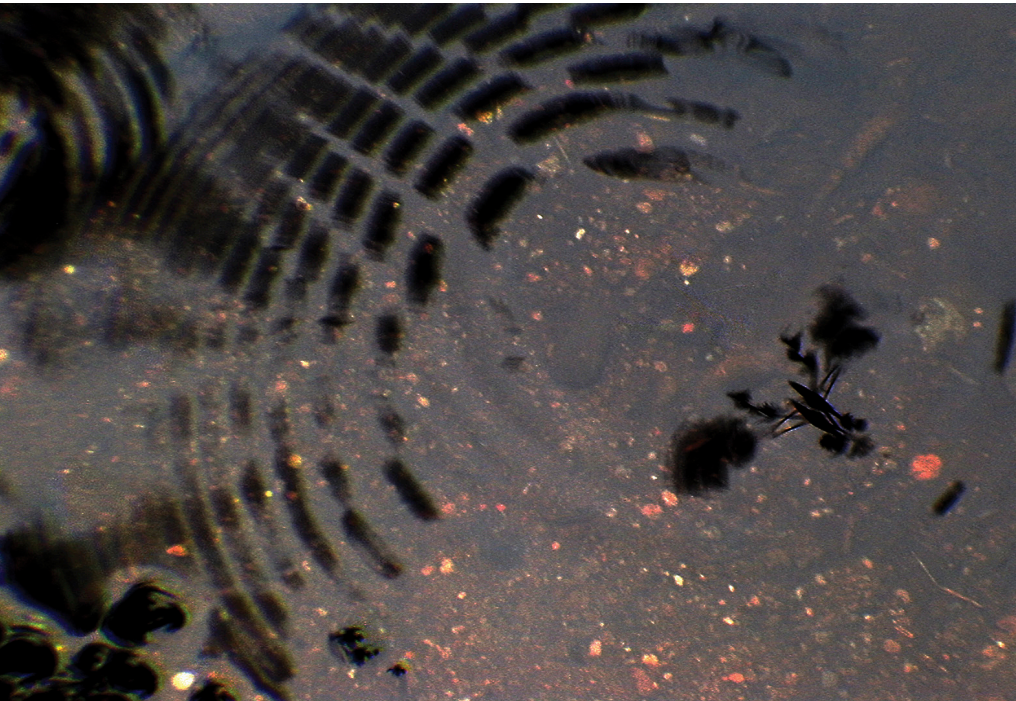
* Footnote: My trailer has three slideouts that expand when I am parked and significantly increase my useable square footage. My slideouts are about a foot smaller than I am, vertically. This means that I have to bend at the waist to walk in them when they are deployed and I like to look out of my windows, so I am often bending over and peering outside, as if peeping on passersby. The result is that most people walking by who happen to see me do so as I’m hunched over like Quasimodo, and I have been living like this for four years. Combined with my walking stick habit, the impression I must make is of an paranoid, invalid shut-in. My appearance is purely incidental, but that fact cannot be conveyed.

what humble, while he – if not necessarily his friends – is deserving of only the best. He would like to switch places with me campsite-wise, and only so.

These are not things I intend to see. I am not spying. But in the stillness of the campground at such close quarters, the goings-on in the immediate vicinity of my

I've been picked at random, or perhaps this man is simply annoyed at everything. It is impossible to know.

The etiquette of living in public demands consideration for other people's privacy, although having traveled for over two years now, I hardly expect much for myself anymore. The whole experience of travel has eroded my self-consciousness to such an extent that sometimes I barely notice that I am in public at all. Like an insecure understudy, I find myself on stage whether I really want to be or not, but I politely try to ignore my neighbors and their picnic of champagne and fine cheese. I soon do. I'm on my hands and knees, deep in the neglected mass of hastily stowed miscellany in the bedroom closet, digging through the trash in the back, searching for my kite.



trailer are impromptu, randomized, and unavoidable. Like activity on a city street, the comings and goings of campers in groups or alone, outdoor activities like campfires and ballgames and the chatter of conversation – all happen so constantly that it becomes background noise, virtually unnoticed except in situations like these.

they were two small business owners making a pitch to an important potential investor. There is an odd obsequiousness in their body language, frozen smiles and eager attention to detail, traces of ceremony in their expressions.

But the man now sits alone in the dunes between my trailer and the edge of the beach in a lawn chair, while

the other two campers – now joined by three others dressed in semi-casual beach clothes – mill about somewhat nervously at their picnic table, attempting to keep the cloth from fluttering away in the kite-weather wind, stealing glances at the man in the dunes, who now seems very much alone.

In the investor scenario he would be mulling a decision about startup capital costs or some such thing while the others agonize over the outcome; but when I nod to the man as I pass him on my way home and receive another hard scowl in return, I become convinced that I'm nowhere near the truth. That isn't what's going on here.

The man grips the hard plastic armrests of the chair as if afraid he will fall out. He sits upright but his sandaled feet press hard at the sand anyway, as if he's afraid he might be forced to stand at any time. His neck and face muscles actually twitch, in a way I've read about but have rarely actually seen, but I realize on second thought that I have – some faces actually do that. His nerves are straining against their own effort, straining against any effort he makes.

This guy is about to snap.

I steer clear, and plod back to my trailer in silence, avoiding eye contact this time – avoiding all contact *forever* would be fine with me and him both.

There is a magic in the constant rolling and



tumbling of the ocean waves that seem to wash my mind clean as efficiently as they work on the rocks and drift logs. There is something in the relative blankness of the landscape that is akin in many ways to closing one's eyes. It is simply easier to concentrate and follow a thought from inception to conclusion without pause.

I have never left the beach with more stress pressing on my shoulders than I brought with me, and frequently with so much less that it feels like none. There is a meditative magic here akin to that of slow breathing. I have seen it work on others, pent-up people who stumble bleary-eyed and red-faced from vehicles parked along waysides on Highway 101, returning much later laughing and smiling, or at the very least, no longer fuming. It is also a self-reinforcing magic, like that to be found while queuing for a movie and catching glimpses of happy patrons exiting the same theater you are about to enter, a Magic that feeds itself.

Revising my scenario, I now believe the man in the lawn chair to be a family patriarch and theoretical benefac-



tor – a man of tremendous wealth and power in his own world – and the others have brought him here because the stress has pushed him to a breaking point: “We have to get Dad to a place he can relax right *now*!”

So they’ve brought him to the beach on a Friday afternoon – perhaps he couldn’t have been dragged away from his office any other day – wine and dined him to the best of their ability, and stuck him in a chair in the dunes to stare at the sea in silence. As long as I am speculating wildly, I imagine he had loved the beach as a boy. He liked to spend time on his yachts at a point much earlier in his adult life but the closest he gets to the ocean these days is a picture of a boat at sea that he keeps over his impossibly heavy wooden desk, which is what gave them the idea in the first place. Theirs is not a bad plan, and it might even work.

But I think they’ve waited too long. All he can see is dune and ocean and sky. Aside from my trailer, there is nowhere for him to focus his nervous energy. He is like a museumgoer studying an oil painting by a great master from a hushed distance. He gets an impression

of peace and beauty, but he misses the little flaws and accidents of the brush strokes, the way light plays on the surface of the dry oil and canvas. The thing to do is not to sit and try – as hard as possible – to relax, but to take off shoes, roll up pantlegs, and try to climb *into* the painting. The thing to do is to throw all reserve to the preternaturally steady winds, to wander onto the blank horizon and follow it until it ends, to revel in the utter pointlessness of it all. Hell, even to *frolic* in it.

The man is not merely sitting in the sand, but *stuck* in it. He has allowed himself to develop such a personality – one of austerity, severity, and stoicism to the point of harshness – that frolicking is out of the question, most especially under the attentive gaze of all, in public. It's a personality that clashes with the magic the place is meant to work upon it.

Maybe he would be happier on a beach in the bustle of high tourist season. Maybe air fed with the din of children engaged in reckless Fun, the smell of smoldering

cedar and barbeque, and the kites and bicycles and the electric buzz of summer might have rejuvenated him, but I doubt it. I've seen that look of extreme overwork before, that volatile expression from sunken eyes. On



a beach, especially one in the carnival depths of summer, there is still too much for a person standing at the precipice of a persona abyss to complain about. There's still too much going on.

If I weren't myself engaged in a game of reckless speculation (and if it were any of my business), I might suggest a padded room and some heavy medication. For

all I know, that *will* be the next step.

Darkness falls, and I no longer pay attention. I don't notice when they roll out of their site before dawn the next morning either. This is a recurring problem with my lifestyle – there is seldom any real sort of closure,



nor is there ever a chance to get to know any of my fellow campers beyond the basics even when there is an opportunity for conversation – which was out of the question with these neighbors the moment their guest saw my trailer. Given the touchiness of the situation as I invented it in my head, I thought it best to stay out of the way as much as possible.

The experience nags, though. It nags not because my guess about what was going on will forever remain only that, and I will never have the facts; it is because I thought I recognized the look in the man's face. I have seen it not only in the mirror – more specifically, shortly before I made my decision to travel – but everywhere I have been: behind me in supermarket checkout lines, idling at gas stations, dumping trash along forest roads, throwing rocks at seagulls, picking children up after school – a gnawing and apparently total dissatisfaction with the imbalance between joyless work and unexpectedly empty leisure, between the evident promise of physical wealth and its inability to deliver genuine Happiness.

In the back of my mind I still harbor a fear that the situation next door really *did* involve small business owners making a pitch to a major investor after all. I would feel lousy for the business owners if my unwashed trailer cost them the opportunity of a lifetime.

Nonetheless, the specter of a man too worried about relaxing to relax will follow me as I turn my trailer around to go south again. He will pop up with all the persistent surprise of a sneaker wave, again and again stalking me and adopting superficial disguises that fail to conceal the reasons for his bitterness even as his failure to act makes him ever more em-

bittered – the meager efforts and pathetic failures of the unhappy rich.

MOSS ON A ROLLING STONE

An old woman – a local – passes me on the beach. We swap pleasantries about the day.

“This is the last we’ll see of the sun for about three months,” she says, and we both chuckle, but it is a laugh of apprehension and we both know it. People here joke about rain the way Midwesterners joke about snow, but as in the Midwest the jokes run out around the beginning of February. Somehow they don’t seem as funny when they are happening, happening much too much and too often, and won’t stop happening.

It becomes possible – perhaps even likely – that the rain will never stop. Waterfalls erupt from cliff faces and gush from deep forest pocket streams that run only during these extreme events, but do so every winter. New streams pour from beneath logs, so saturated is the ground that water simply begins to flow in a place that was previously dry, temporary springs that spout anew annually. Enough rain can rearrange the topography itself, and these beaches average over seventy inches a year.

Outside my trailer, newborn lakes emerge. When the rain finally stops – if it stops – I will have to drop wooden blocks and other spare items from my trailer basement to make a path of makeshift stepping stones or I’ll have

to simply wade out through the muck barefoot.

I’m rained-in.

To a noticeable degree, one’s experience of the weather here depends on where one is standing. The Coast Range squeezes water from clouds the way a spatula pressed against a sizzling hamburger on a grill squeezes out the fat: after crossing the flat expanse of the Pacific and encountering the mountains, moisture-laden clouds try to force an amount of water vapor through a space in the atmosphere too small for it, creating rain.

The windward sides of individual slopes tend to get the wettest – in some places and in some seasons and for all intents and purposes, it practically never *does* stop – while clouds passing to the leeward side, freshly wrung of water, tend to slip by relatively quietly – after one more vigorous squeezing by the Cascade range – and evaporate in the high deserts to the east.

As a result, microclimates are quite common: ancient rainforests abut meandering dunes, species change and flowers ignite at different times on different sides of a single hill. A well-planned hike can reward the hiker with wildly different scenarios at beginning, middle, and end, three hikes bought with the muscle cost of one.

Starting around Halloween, low pressure systems begin to stall over the Northwest coast, establishing “atmospheric rivers” that terminate directly over my trailer. The systems draw deep subtropical moisture to cover the entire region, like a straw at the bottom of a cold wet beverage – Oregon drinks Hawaii’s milkshake – or like a rusted-over faucet stuck on its widest

aperture.

During one such marathon on the Central Coast I bundle up in my rain gear and roam a beach, having grown disgusted by the sight of condensation on my trailer windows (and I would later discover mold growing on the otherwise pristine glass). I stumble along rocky dunes at low tide in howling winds and horizontal rain until I descend to a small stream swollen to overflowing; over the years the stream in such states has wound

a path through hard-packed sandstone such that the resulting cliffs block nearly all of the wind and rain. In the near-inaccessible cavities thus created, dozens of gulls and a few crows hunker with beaks folded under wings and pressed to warm downy breasts. I have discovered the empire of the birds, the place they go during storms. It is a mystery I have always pondered and I've solved it by accidental necessity. I crouch low and bury my own runny nose and wind-blasted face into the collar of my coat and pull it more closely about me, to ride out the worst of the squall with the birds who know best where to be at a time like this.

When at last the rain begins to slacken in spring – as it always does, but only in its own time – it does so from south to north, traveling in synchronicity with the lengthening days. Fate and coincidence put me and my trailer in the parade three years in a row – I get to travel with the sun as it unrolls itself up the coast all three times, like a procession of tidings of good things to come.

New life bursts from every dead log and stump, piles of manure or old bones, every branch and twig, and everything growing on everything else. Dormant spores awaken after the rains pass, fungal sprouts blossom and propel weird tendrils from forest floors, the latest generation of that non-animal, non-plant kingdom of life, like alien species made of chitin – the same hard material that encases insect guts and those of sea creatures within their shells. The southwest-facing edge of an exposed beach picnic table has been gnawed at by the winter – big chunks of wood chewed off by an insatiable monster made of wind and water. Luminescent moss and pale lime green lichens



bend sunward from the teeth marks.*

The whole scene is dwarfed during my second spring riding north with the sun by a sign hidden in all the new life. It is an annoying reminder of a nomadic life-style showing symbolic signs of decay:

In a semi-forgotten campground in western Louisiana I had put a half-foot scar in the hard surface of the shell of my trailer when I backed it into a tree, and I have left it exposed, open to the elements but seemingly inconsequential; in the pervasive damp of recent months, however, a small patch of literal moss has taken hold, producing perhaps a tiny amount of extra wind sheer that slows me ever so imperceptibly as I continue rolling my figurative stone a little further on down the Road.

THE DOG AND THE SEA-CREATURE

A windsurfer in a wetsuit carves graceful arcs in the deep water just off the edge of the low-tide line, where rounded waves roll in slowly and spend themselves but do not carry far. The water goes from deep to shallow quickly but there is nothing but wet, soft sand in which

to crash, and I watch him with a group of tourists from Idaho with whom I've been chatting.** The condition of the tide puts the windsurfer only about fifty feet away from us as he tacks with and against the western wind, manipulating his sail to keep his surfboard steady in the breakers, dodging or leaping over the largest. He seems awfully close to dry land to me.

Soon a gust knocks him off-balance and he turns the wrong way, the rudder fin on the bottom of his board gouging into deep sand, destabilizing him still further. He twists into a final spin and collapses at water's edge in a tangled mass of bicarbonate tubing and nylon, an undignified end to a picturesque ride.

In need of no prompting, the Idahoans' dog rushes at the discombobulated creature in its attempt to emerge from the sea, perhaps instinctively sensing a moment of weakness in the thing's awkward labor. A frenzy of yowling barks and chomping teeth descends on the hapless creature, becoming all claws and lolling tongue and wagging tail as it snarls false defiance. The dog's name "BUSTER" is stitched into a sweater that has been wrapped around its torso to keep out the autumn chill.

Buster's attack is more vocal than actual, as if by virtue of the volume of the racket he is making, he can scare the creature back to the sea, back from whence it came. It is the kind of bluff any dog lover can see through in an instant.

From the creature's perspective, he has just beached his wind-sail and has become caught in its rigging, is struggling to free himself while breakers continue to

* Footnote: Lichens are the grandmasters of fungi. There are over a thousand species of lichens in the Northwest, making them prime candidates for weirdness. Some are incredibly rare; discovering them while hiking is like finding an Easter egg. They combine two pigments of algae (one is actually a cyanobacterium) within themselves to create an array of colors between green and blue-green. Some nevertheless somehow turn out red, yellow, orange, brown, and gray, making them favorite subjects for macro shots.

** Footnote: I think the vehicle license plates from Idaho are my favorites. They say on them simply: "FAMOUS POTATOES."

pummel him with merciless disregard, and he is now confronted with a mock land battle begun by sneak attack but ultimately full of sound and fury, signifying only slightly more than Nothing.

The Idahoans go to collect their dog and apologize; I continue down the beach.

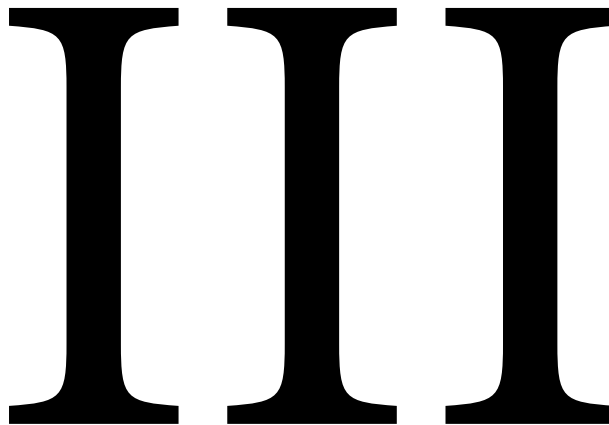
“The portrait is a mask which is wrought with the utmost attention being paid to preserving a likeness in regard to both its shape and its contour. Displaying these portraits at public sacrifices, they honor them in a spirit of emulation, and when a prominent member of the family dies, they carry them in the funeral procession, putting them on those who seem most like [the deceased] in size and build....”

– Polybius



WHEN BIG FOOT MET BILLIE JEAN

The cape blocks out everything to the south and east, and a miles-long sand spit means that travel north must be by foot or beach bike. Of course, west is out of the question. All that connects this place to the others is a road that rolls through, over, and around a knot of hills broken here and there by clear-cuts and a few swamps, pastures, and cranberry bogs. These are among my favorite of all places – those that seem to be cut off so thoroughly from the others that it has a psychological atmosphere unto itself, like



a dream.

The beach at Cape Lookout isn't really a surfing beach. The cape juts two miles into the ocean, disrupting the waves on either side, shifting sand as a natural jetty and changing the behavior of the adjacent waves. Here the waves tumble in one after another, and all the time. There often isn't even enough space between waves for a surfer to become launched, even if the waves were rideable. For bodyboarding, however, it is



ideal.

The car alarms of city-dwellers rise in various quarters of various campgrounds all summer long, both the pre-dawn and post-dusk darknesses pierced by cars screaming for their lives in the easily-jolted parking spots of Nature, choking perhaps on clean air to which they are unaccustomed. City sounds are predictable patterns broken frequently by the unexpected. Beach sounds are always rhythmic, the pace seldom changing and doing so only slowly. The pace is slower and steadier, more

like a heartbeat than a symphony, more the pounding drums of headhunters than “Rhapsody in Blue.”

I stop to watch a heron hunt in a lake. The bird evolved a slender head and neck that to a fish under the surface of the water looks like nothing but a twig. It holds its head at a forty-five-degree angle, its rubbery neck coiled in an “S” shape until it makes a darting attack, a noiseless, surgical strike; it throws its head back to gulp down its victim. The hunt itself is all serenity and patience.

W H E N B I G F O O T M E T B I L L I E J E A N

Herons shy away from sudden noises and motion and are quick to fly off on their wide blue wings no matter how plentiful the food. These are birds so secretive that watching them hunt in broad daylight feels like a violation of some sort, like a filthy act.

If there were something to the west of Oregon, I would have gone there instead. The Edge is permanent but it shifts, revealing bonus land for us to explore, extra manifest destiny left in the national tank. New territory is being created exceedingly slowly. If we would be patient, new land would be created by natural geo-

logical forces, but no: waiting is not in our national character. A few thousand years hence, all of these villages and beaches will have been pushed into new high-and-dry foothills, and new villages will rise to replace them, presumably, a few miles west of here. I wonder if the beaches will still look the same, or if they will be unrecognizable.

I hope I am never asked to talk on TV. It seems to me that people who want others to talk on TV are really just looking for a soundbite, so if I were asked to talk on TV, here is what I would say in response, here's my soundbite: "If I wanted to talk on TV, I'd write a book



called *I Want To Talk On TV*.”

Even Lewis and Clark took note of the relative scarcity of bears and wolves on this coast, but then, they had just descended from the Rocky Mountains. They noted too the utter absence of grizzlies. As for wolves, I have met at least one. A couple I happened to meet in the mountains one day had a purebred wolf on a choke chain. It’s sky-blue eyes knocked me right over, as wolves’ eyes always do.

Although they claim it was domesticated, I suspect there really is no telling where it may have come from, or how wild it is. It’s a mongrel, a word based on the Old English word *mong*, meaning “mixture.” It seems domesticated, but it reserves for itself the austere beastliness typical of purebred wolves.

I’ve heard it often enough to say it is simply a thing that happens a lot – has probably happened since before humans were even humans: when a group of girls gets together in a campground, a screaming match often follows. They sound like shrill songbirds testing one another’s songs: they all scream at once, then each girl presumably takes a turn (the screams are staggered and are performed solo). Such screaming matches can (and do) last up to an hour. Boys rarely limit their competitions to such nonsense, although I have seen punching matches, rock-throwing skirmishes, feats of urination and the like.

The laughter of other campers and the song of the Swainson’s thrush are similar. I recognize the laughter of a specific camper when I hear it here and there over the course of a few days in the same way I hear the thrush’s upscale, downscale song and become familiar

with its peculiarities – the way it cuts out at the high end for a specific bird and breaks low for another. The voices of others, if one makes no effort to comprehend the meanings of the words and listens only to the sound of the screams and shouts – the whispers and steady rhythms of a conversation on low boil – can be appreciated merely on those terms, as mere emanations of Nature. These after all are the natural exclamations of human animals.

Some campers have especially unique laughs. One week a family camps somewhere nearby in the campground – I never quite figure out where exactly, as it seems to be all over the place – and I am surprised several times throughout each day, all week long, by the laughter of a boy who sounds exactly like Ralphie’s little brother from the movie *A Christmas Story*. It is like a woodchuck on lithium, the most effervescent noise I think I have ever heard coming from human vocal chords. I smile all the time now, just remembering it.

I am somewhat jealous of his parents, classmates, and siblings, who don’t have to imagine at all.

T H E K I N G O F D E A T H

I get the news on a Friday afternoon during pointless time – a gorgeous summer day and I slump in a seat in front of a flickering computer screen, mindlessly clicking a mouse. I am recovering from a bout of back spasms by surfing the internet, but it is a flimsy excuse; in truth I am doing nothing and thinking Nothing, the dog days having descended early onto a pre-vegetalized me, the once and future and all-time King of the

Lazy.

Michael Jackson couldn't be much closer to the last thing on my mind if he tried, as irrelevant to me today as my winter gloves and wool cap, but the sudden news of his death at home in Los Angeles earlier in the day utterly changes the course of it – both my solidly entrenched laziness and the time warp to come, the course of the whole upcoming weekend. At this moment the news flashes around the world, doing the same thing to people everywhere, and there is no escaping it, no way out, no way through: no avoiding the funk to come.

I pull on my best pair of sandals and go out into the sunshine for the evening. I beat it.

The campground is in a small town – actually, it is little more than a fragile smear of houses along the edge of a bay next to a jetty, not so small as to be insignificant, but small enough to feel like a self-contained place within and unto itself, like a stage – or rather, it is next to a town, or wedged between two towns: it is hard to pin its location down more precisely – a very Michael Jacksonish kind of town in that regard if no others, his music videos tending to feature as they do generic stand-ins for cities – *ideas* for places, in other words – moreso than actual ones.

But the news travels faster than I do. The first few beats I hear cause me to turn my head, as those beats always do: the unmistakable first half-second of “Billie Jean” slithers out of an opened car window like a whiff of smoke from the set of the “Thriller” video, and I am instantly back in 1982, prowling the streets of my hometown – or something like it – like a pop culture zombie. And I am not alone.

Like fireflies, the tunes begin to rise from every camp-

site, from every backyard in the neighborhood around it. Although sprinkled here and there can be found a few more recent hits and some suddenly startling Jackson Five tunes – the boy's voice is one that does not belong to a boy, and the boy himself sounds truly heartbroken, on this of all days – it is *Thriller* that I can hear so clearly that I begin to slip in time like Billy Pilgrim. I hear a fake conversation in my head that begins with “last one back in time is a rotten egg” and ends with “gag me” and “fer sure.”

Thriller has always sounded the same to me every time I've heard it. It always has the same sizzle and thump, a beat that by its ubiquity was infused into me when I was a kid, like Bugs Bunny. The way *Thriller* sounds as an album – in a basic, aesthetic, danceable sense – is unlike any other album I know. To modern ears it sounds over-produced, but I think it is a genuine cultural touchstone of the type that don't come around often, a touchstone for me not only in cultural memory but in personal memory as well. If the memory of my childhood has a soundtrack, somewhere in the mix, perhaps only as omnipresent background noise but no less funky or slick, is a scratched-up copy of *Thriller* rotating under a needle at thirty-three revolutions per minute. It is what I am hearing now.

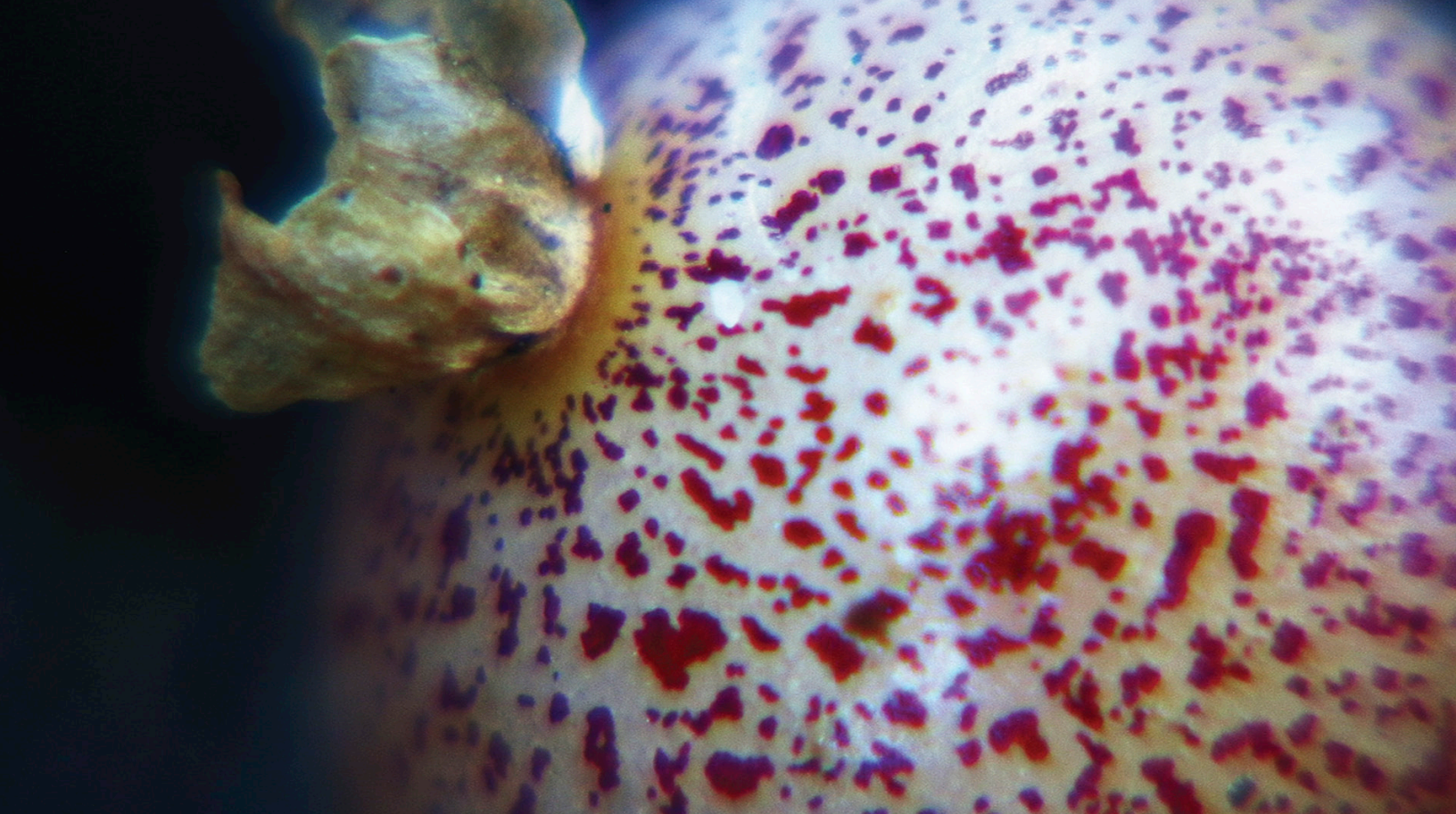
Today – on the day of his Rock death – it is easy to remember when Michael Jackson was more than just a performer and *Thriller* was more than an album. From the utter blue of irrelevancy, young boy Jackson – now grown, now dead – returns to the Pop cultural center ground he cleared not with musical skill – although he was never lacking there – but with advertising, image making and unmaking and remaking and unremaking, and the ruthless branding of a presidential candidate or multinational conglomerate (or both).



The time of his greatest glory was – and perhaps still is – the time when Michael Jackson became global royalty, befriendng and marrying princesses of other international regal bloodlines, acquiring jesters and freaks for sideshows and accumulating their greatest artifacts as tribute. Jackson became, for a short while in 1982/83, a Pop God.

It was the point at which the flash and shine of the ce-

lebrity-spectacle had yet to fully dissolve into the twenty-four hour white noise of Now. Western mass culture – standing in the spotlight of world mass culture by default, at least during the era – was becoming more and more industrialized and efficient, having rebuilt in the wake of earlier explosions – Elvis Presley’s TNT bomb, The Beatles’ atomic bomb, and even the Sex Pistols’ hydrogen bomb – to discover a nice surprise in Jackson’s neutron bomb, which wiped out all other artists but left



the infrastructure of the industry standing. Here is an over-simplification, of course, but then one doesn't go to Pop music for complexity.

At this point a line needs to be drawn between Rock and Pop. Pop is anything that looks good; the image of the Pop star is everything, the music he or she makes – or is supposed to have made – virtually nothing. Rock is ugly and abusive, a fire that cannot be contained and burns too brightly to last very long, but tends to be more profound in its effects on listeners. Rock can change the course of a fan's life; Pop can only change spending habits and weekends.

Thriller was once considered Pop, but I think it can now be classified as Rock. Rock music seems to always sound the way it used to sound, and it will sound the same again Now, and again Now – and it seems to always be fundamentally about the same topics of love, sex, drugs, fast cars, guns, and Rock itself, like the same hit record stuck on repeat, forever. When Rock music – virtually indistinguishable it seems from “world music” (or even just “music”) at this late, semi-drunk stage in the long cultural joyride left over from the Twentieth Century and fueling itself on simple inertia – runs out of places to go, it creates them.

That is, Rock makes a Home for itself.

of a nationally televised football game.*

It seems like all of this has happened before. Elvis Presley's death has been called surprising, but I think this is partially due to a hangover effect caused by the only other Fifties-era rocker to die a Rock death that shook, rattled, and rolled so many fans so hard, that of Buddy Holly, which truly *was* shocking. But by the end of his life, Elvis was hardly anyone's picture of health. Overweight and hooked on a cocktail of barbiturates and junk food, The King in the mid-'70s wasn't long for this world, and he looked it.

Another, later Rock death was also both genuinely shocking and tragic, the "assassination" of John Lennon in 1981. The outpouring of grief around the world was compounded for fans by the fact that one of The Beatles was murdered by one of them, deranged Holden Caulfield wanna-be or not.

Jackson's death has some of the looming inevitability of Elvis's – Jackson's doctor will be blamed for his administration of the drugs the Pop star has been long addicted to, if the tabloid talking heads are right – but with the media friendliness and prime-time appeal of Lennon's, which was first announced to the world at the tail end

News of Lennon's death spawned Beatles marathons even on Country and Motown radio stations. Part of New York's Central Park near the hotel outside of which Lennon was shot was set aside and dedicated as "Strawberry Fields" in his memory. The grief was real, and so was the rest of it. Strawberry Fields is still there – might be there forever, or close enough to satisfy me – and so is the hotel.

The mourning goes on: each anniversary of the moment sparks more Beatles marathons and retrospectives – the replays of Cosell's announcement in both aural and visual form are like Charlie Brown cartoons, in the way they appear each year at the same time – that grow ever more bittersweet and abstract the further we get in time from the Sixties.

It is too soon to know how Jackson's Rock death will be commemorated – it's only just happened – but in a few



* Footnote: The announcement of Lennon's death by Howard Cosell is one of those details mentioned every time the event is discussed, the footage of Cosell's announcement regurgitated in every documentary and post-Beatles retrospective, even the flimsiest and most cursory ones. It seems to be one of those details so irresistible as to have become unavoidable, an announcement of a Rock death turned to a cultural touchstone in and of itself.

days celebrities will converge for a once-in-a-lifetime funerary spectacle that I will miss because I won't really care about it anymore. The kind of made-for-TV self-adoration to be staged a few days hence couldn't be less relevant, will be as unsettling and vacuous as it always is when mass culture talks to itself in small words. What interests me is the scene in the campground, in the little town I'm in today. What matters, as Jackson himself surely knew when he recorded *Thriller* in the studio, is the word on the street.

I like Michael Jackson's music when I hear it, which isn't often. Aside from what now seems to have been a brief period of interest in Pop music – between the ages of eight and twelve, about the right age, it seems to me – I haven't been paying close attention. Strolling around I still mostly hear *Thriller* and the follow-up *Bad* more than anything else, but some girls in one campsite are dancing to something that sounds new-ish but I don't recognize the songs, just the plaintive voice and superfluous grunts and squeals – unmistakable Jackson.

An old hippy drives through the campground in a beat-up Monte Carlo, clad in tie dyes, blaring "ABC." I have to smile. It is the automatic soul in little Michael's voice, even at age five. It may still be the last day of his life, but he sounds okay to me.

It is not morbid curiosity that guides me, but the spontaneously generated, unpredictable and completely unsteered social phenomenon I see. This morning we were planning a generic summer weekend at the beach; now we're all firmly locked into an Eighties flashback weekend, roving Jacksonites, all of us bad, and off the wall, and dangerous, a makeshift community of politic Captain Eos, the Pepsi Generation version 2.0, and the headlines read:

THE DAY THE MUSIC CAME BACK TO LIFE, SORT OF

I keep walking around, and I begin to look for ancient clues. Although the ancients lacked bona fide Pop stars, Alexander the Great might do as an example from Western culture, an ultimate baseline for historical comparison of Rock deaths. As one-time ruler of the known world (again, from a strictly Western perspective) he subsumes any artist or philosopher of his day – even Aristotle – because tyrants subsume all in a time of tyranny, which his surely was.

The death of Alexander is also useful because we get two deaths for the price of one, another pale shade of off-gray for contrast. Alexander's best friend forever Hephaestion – a friend in the truest sense, as easily linked in death as they were in life – died eight months prior to Alexander, while they were tooling around Darius III's Persian Empire. Alexander's immediate reaction was to have Hephaestion's doctor killed and to declare himself a god; the Macedonian Senate, tongues firmly in cheeks, issued the proclamation.

The new god Alexander staged a flamboyant funeral for his friend, with elaborate games and artistic and athletic competitions. The celebratory funeral no doubt masked a personal pain that was surely real, and Alexander slipped into a depression that, combined with alcohol, nagging injuries, a bevy of tropical diseases borne by insects and filth – not to mention the overwork of ruling the known world – would soon do him in as well. His death at age thirty-two could be considered mildly shocking, even considering the primitive conditions and relative paucity of medical information

of the day, but those around him could have seen The End approaching as clearly as those around Elvis, as clearly as those around Jackson.*

A massive struggle for the future of Western civilization erupted after Alexander's death, but things seem pretty calm here. In fact, they are beautiful – beautiful the way mourning vigils can be beautiful, in a tourist-swollen small town free of the glitzy self-consolation of L.A. and the cheesy spectacle of too-public grief: beautiful like the mourning of true fans, with thoughts that wander with the radio play lists of the man who tonight is the best singer in the universe.

I can't get over how good *Thriller* sounds to me tonight. I can't get over the fact that the weekend is changed forever, and all he had to do was die. I am sad, but I am celebrating.

Thriller sounds like someone crawled inside the decade, captured a pocket of time in a thermos and made it into an album. It sounds like the Eighties because it made them, and not only by its music. All the boys tried to look like Michael Jackson. All the girls, too. Some schools resorted to banning the wearing of a single glove – only pairs were permitted.

* Footnote: The rest of the story surrounding the immediate aftermath of Alexander's death makes for a comedy of errors of literally historic proportions – historians are still sorting it out. In the current discussion the most relevant tidbit is that Alexander's body – or a year after his death it might be more appropriate to say his *remains* – traveled in the midst of a grand procession from Egypt, where he died, back to his Macedonian Home, following an advanced party of road builders who constructed the road the coffin would take; he was hijacked by Alexander's other pal Ptolemy, new pharaoh of Egypt, who took Alexander's corpse back to Alexandria and at last buried it... somewhere.

Photographs of reclining Pop stars on the fronts of album jackets were a staple of the late '70s and early '80s, but it is Jackson's serious coolness that has become the icon. There is an aura about him – today it appears ghostly – jheri-curls casually but precisely dribbling down his forehead, and a human-looking nose. His expression is that of Mona Lisa. It is nowhere close to a smile, nor is it close to a scowl, nor is it blank. Today, it is both tragic and completely Natural.

Michael Jackson in 1982, reclining against an unseen object, looking at the camera with impossible sincerity – that's how I want to remember him, not as a Pop King, but as a Pop God. And how often does a Pop God die? We have to boil the issue down to a matter of degrees, there being so few genuine Pop Gods to compare.

Here's the math over-simplified, and even by the most vaporous and vacuous standards, Michael Jackson is at the top of the list. The phrase "Death of Michael Jackson" racks up almost three million hits on Google. For comparison, "Death of John Lennon" scores a quarter of a million, and "Death of Buddy Holly" nets a mere fifty thousand.**

When a Rock star dies, it is that they will never again make music – we'll never again have the joy of unwrapping a new CD and popping the pristine, lintless disk into our machine – that is why we weep. That

** Footnote: Here are some more: "Alexander the Great" – over nine hundred thousand; "Kurt Cobain" – over eight hundred thousand (as the years go by I find myself getting angrier and angrier at Cobain – in fact, I'm getting angrier at all of them); "Jimi Hendrix" – six hundred seventy thousand; "John Belushi" – one hundred eighty thousand; "Stevie Ray Vaughn" – fifty-five thousand; "River Phoenix" – thirty-two thousand; "Isadora Duncan" – six thousand.

Rock stars reach us through both music and words – a double-tap to the aesthetic and emotional solar plexus – we end up with broken hearts that ache harder in the morning, when we wake up to the new reality.*

Overdoses and suicides – unless there are aggravating circumstances more interesting than doctor incompetence or more circumstantial than mere rumors of murder – are supremely boring as Rock deaths go. Car crashes are boring unless the victim is sober and obeying the traffic laws. Plane and helicopter and boat crashes are always good – the more random the better – there being usually also plenty of room for conspiracy theories and speculations about destinies fulfilled or left undone. These last have the added appeal of genuine human tragedy, which can't always be said. Murders, especially when committed during band



meetings or onstage, are sure to guarantee unsubstantiated speculation and, therefore, longevity.**

On the subject of longevity, Elvis, Jackson, and presumably every Rock star to die for the rest of time will be able to compete for a new record, to find out which corpse can flog the most products. Elvis's songs have been used to sell everything from bubblegum to washing machines since his demise, as has Lennon's.

It is too soon to know how Jackson's memory and music will be abused for corporate purposes, but it's surely coming. "Beat It" would seem to lend itself to a cornucopia of products, as would "Man in the Mirror." And "Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough" would seem to be custom-made for ad campaigns

that attempt to make gluttony a virtue, such as those targeted tactlessly at "bacon lovers."

Decorum – even morbid Pop decorum – dictates that some time must pass before the cross-marketed adver-

* Footnote: Peter Bergman of the Firesign Theatre died on March 9, 2012. I didn't find out for three weeks after the fact because I had been boondocking – camping without electric hookups – in the mountains, out of range of all but the stoutest of cell phone signals. It took me three weeks to recover, which I did by putting *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me The Pliers* on endless repeat on my MP3 player.

** Footnote: I am not advocating bandmate-icide, no matter how well-reasoned the arguments.



tising campaigns can officially begin, but given the readiness with which Jackson embraced commercialism in life – literal commercialism, in this case – my guess is that in about three years we will see an onslaught of macabre marketing angles, Gen-X nostalgic overload in a tight pair of “Jacko’s Billie Blue Jeans.” Just ask Nat King Cole.

In the spirit of the Eighties, I plan to “Just Say No!”

When ancient Romans celebrated the life of the recently deceased – if they were prominent citizens and the family could afford it – they hired a performer called an *archimimus*. These actors would have studied the habits of their subjects by watching them go about their business in the forum so that when they died they could perform a convincing impression. We can imagine that many of these players might have honed their impressions by satirizing in life the prominent men that they would eventually be honoring in death.

Michael Jackson hardly needs one – not only because of the ubiquity of his image, plastered as it still is all over global media – but also because of the profusion of imitators who have already used it to mock him and have hounded him with it his entire life. To be fair, he was a celebrity with a distinctive personality with distinctive mannerisms and speech, which in America makes one an automatic target for imitation – just as his singing style and voice have spawned countless ripoff acts that still inhabit the Pop village he built more or less by virtue

of his talent first, his now somewhat tarnished image second.

Unlike the formalized images created by the Egyptians and the Greeks, the Romans alive during the Republic sought realistic depictions of themselves through their sculpture. When we look at a bust of Julius Caesar, we are looking at a sculpture meant to precisely resemble him: in essence, we are looking at him as we look at a photo, the details probably almost as accurate to “real life” as, say, Matthew Brady’s portrait of Abraham Lincoln.

When a prominent member of a noble Roman family died, their marble bust was carried in the funeral procession by a family member or an archimimus, perhaps partially concealed beneath a robe such that only the bust carried on his shoulders could be seen. It would thus appear as if the recently deceased had risen and was partaking in his own funeral parade.

When the Roman Republic became the Roman Empire, the precise realism to which sculpture had evolved – going so far as to depict wrinkles and warts – was suddenly a dilemma. Beginning with the “living god” Augustus, idealized fictions began to enter the medium; after all, who ever heard of a god with wrinkles and warts?

And because the emperor’s image was everywhere – not only on coins and tapestries and mosaics, but on mass-produced figurines that average Romans kept (and presumably sometimes prayed to) in their own Homes – a single idealized vision of the emperor carved in marble (pending his approval, of course) was reproduced ad nauseum, without variation. All room for personal expression by the sculptor was impinged, and the era of

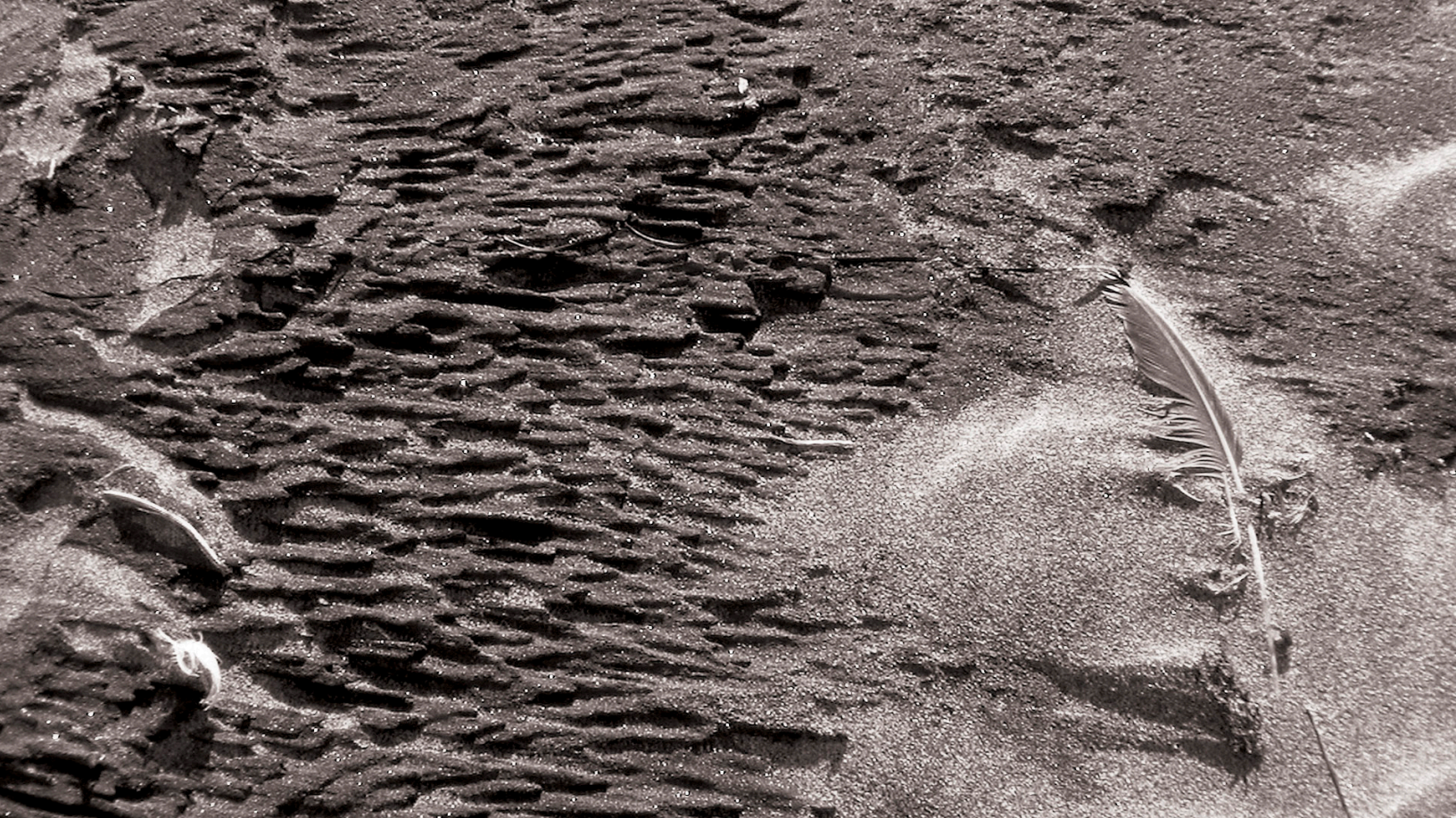
propaganda was begun.*

Here too is why there are no depictions of Augustus Caesar – a man who ruled to a great old age and made an Empire – as an old man. Octavian Augustus Caesar is forever young, indeed.

I am preoccupied this weekend by a fantasy about my own childhood, more or less the same as it was the first time but now transferred to this small town in this small town summer, pop-top aluminum cans and Pac-Man Fever, skateboarding boardwalks in daylight, skinny-dipping moonlit bays at midnight. I see the ballpark where I failed miserably at pony league baseball, the community pool where my older brother’s friends held me under too long, the spot under the lifeguard stand where I stole my first kiss: time-travel by Pop culture cliché, myself a cultural chrononaut, a tourist of both time and space, living like Doctor Who.

The moment is as ripe as it will ever be for a moonwalk, a dance move I taught myself when I was ten. I haven’t attempted dancing of any sort in years, but something about the day makes me want to try again. I bust a few moves for strangers. I even try to teach a few of the younger ones, who are mystified at first – the way we all were circa 1982 – but the illusion wears

* Footnote: It is worthy of note that one of the earliest forms of propaganda is money itself. Roman emperors – and imperial usurpers with the means to do so – planted messages on the reverse sides of the coins they issued to their legionaries as payment. Especially emperors on shaky political ground used the very currency itself to praise themselves (complete with their portraits on the obverse side).



off after I show them how it works.*

My faulty back starts to scream at me again about half-

* Footnote: Here's how it works: 1. Start with a pair of smooth-soled shoes and a dance surface that allows your feet to glide across rather than grip it. 2. Put about ninety-five percent of your weight on your right toe, and bend your right leg as if you were taking a step backwards. 3. Slide your left foot back, keeping it flat against the ground and your weight on your right toe. 4. Bend your left leg and put all of your weight on it, straightening and removing your weight from your right leg. 5. Slide the right foot back while keeping it flat against the ground, transfer weight again, and repeat. You should now be moonwalking. The key is to keep the weight on the correct foot; when in doubt, remember where Michael liked to put it: on his toes.

way through my first moonwalk, a dance devised by someone with rubber hips.** Jackson may have learned it from a lifetime's collection of show-biz friends; I learned it from a long-playing album to which the needle of my turntable would never remain stuck, bounc-

** Footnote: Michael Jackson didn't invent the moonwalk, but he discovered and popularized it in the Eighties. I like to imagine his most immediate inspiration was James Brown (just as his squeal and verbal hiccups were borrowed from Buddy Holly), but similar moves had been practiced by movie stars in musicals and by street mimes even before Brown got ahold of it. With the right shoes and dance surface, it would be possible with a load of momentum to slide one's feet while also generally sliding over the floor – it is a matter of means of propulsion to me. I think a genuine moonwalk ought to be self-propelled and repeatable, making it in theory unending.

ing as it did along with my bedroom floor. The album was called *So You Want to Breakdance?* or something equally stupid.

We are all having Fun until the kid from Japan shows up. He is camping with family or friends – he speaks no English, so I'll never know – and has mastered break-dancing somehow, for reasons I have difficulty imagining. It is possible he learned from a dancing-based video game, but he can even moonwalk better than I can – why must *that* be necessary?

He dances literal circles around me. As he does so, the kids of total strangers gaze at him in awe, as they had gazed in my direction before he showed up. He evokes gasps and laughter, admiration and respect. He is the life of the party, the hero of my now-aborted time-travel fantasy, way better than I will ever be, and my back aches ever more acutely just watching him.

And so I will never moonwalk again. The King of Pop is dead.

Postscript: This essay is only a cheap cover version of a classic, and a self-conscious one at that, even going so far as to borrow a metaphorical riff or two. I owe much in this essay to the writing of cultural critic Greil Marcus – still among the living – who first introduced me to the concept of Rock death through his books, all of which I highly recommend. An essay Marcus wrote at the End of the decade called “Rock Death in the 1970’s: A Sweepstakes” – which brilliantly ranks nearly all of them – is among the most obvious thefts herein perpetrated. Marcus’s writing is like this – I feel compelled to hum along.

BIG FOOT ONE: OF SKOOKUMS AND SKEPTICS

Primeval forests, it is unsurprising, have a primitive effect on the mind. In the half-lit glades of the deepest forests the mind is easily tricked into seeing the trees shift slightly, just a brief flash of shadowy movement at the edge of vision. They vanish when an attempt is made to see them. Indians of the area called these spirits “skookum,” a word that maintains its magic among the long-established families – Anglo and otherwise – of the Pacific Northwest.

At what is now known as Devil’s Lake, entrepreneurial Indians once wove stories – for the benefit of Californians “gone up the coast” for a holiday weekend – about demonic creatures that emerged from the lake to feed from time to time – on those selfsame tourists, naturally.

If the legend of Bigfoot hadn’t emerged in its time and place as it did, something very much like it would have. The psychological aura – not to mention the economics of the tourist industry – demand it. Bigfoot, or someone like him, is inevitable.

The Bigfoot myth not only satisfies the human need to be scared shitless for fun, but it clicks neatly into the history and potential future history of the place, a legend demanded by the place itself and manifested in its people – a perfect union.

But herein begins to creep doubt.



The strongest evidence against the existence of Bigfoot isn't that no one has managed to shoot one and drag its hairy hide (or at least a handful of fur) to a bona fide scientist – in a nation teeming with guns, as well as taxidermists, meat processing plants, veterinaries, and good old-fashioned police officers – but the utter lack of evidence in the fossil record.

If Bigfoot really were present or indeed has ever been, Bigfootkind would have left behind fossilized bones and skulls by the barrelful, just like every other species to have inhabited the two American continents since prehistory. Even if Bigfoot religiously burned every trace of his ancestors before burying them, there would

still be evolutionary traces of some sort of ancestor, a proto-Bigfoot, in the ground.

There are of course other good arguments that don't help Bigfoot's odds of existence either: why haven't natural disasters like floods and landslides produced at least a few bodies of the creatures, and where are the remains of those who died by accident and misadventure while wandering in the forest on their own? Why has he never run amok in a small town like a scared deer or elk or moose? Why *hasn't* he been shot, a fair question in America that could be said of many things?

He would have to be preternaturally alert to be able to

escape all distinguished and dogged human scientists at all times. If, say, a tenured professor of anthropology were to see him and take a photo as proof, the whole game would be up. So far as I know, none yet has. If such a professor had such an encounter and failed to raise it for academic discussion, he or she would be guilty of dereliction of scholarly duty; if they did raise such evidence, their reputation if not their livelihood would be on the line, making false eyewitness statements (such as with a hoax) highly unlikely. They would have to be taken seriously, and none are.

Some Indian legends that enthusiasts have pointed to

as proof should be taken with a grain of salt. Indians often wove tales about monsters and the bounty they discovered around them, as did the people of ancient Europe or Asia or anywhere else, and they freely incorporated dreams and hallucinations into their stories.* In other words, their accounts are as subject to the subconscious finagling of the imagination as those of modern white men, and quite frequently moreso. Without books or the scientific method to guide them, they used

* Footnote: In the case of modern sightings – and surely ancient ones as well – there is also the issue of hallucinogenic drugs, which tend to cause one to, well, hallucinate.



what they found in their immediate vicinity and relied on their own imaginations to make logical connections.

The evidence against him preponderates, but still the trees shift as I pick my route through the half-lit glades, growing only darker with each bend in the hiking trail. The skookum are as alive and real as they ever were tonight, lack of evidence be damned.

THE BIRDSEYE LOWDOWN

I am preparing for a busy weekend of hiking and people-watching at Cape Lookout on a beautiful Fourth of July, my first of many holidays to be spent on or immediately next to the beach. It has only been a few weeks since I arrived and it is all shrink-wrapped, everything I see and everything that happens.

I'm halfway out the door and down the steps of my trailer – in over-optimistic swim trunks and a beach towel slung over my shoulder – when my cell phone rings. It is my sister. She is about to tell me our father has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and wreck my weekend. She is about to send me on a crash course about that particular cancer and its survival statistics. She's about to do a lot of things to my life.

Warning signs of pancreatic cancer are varied, so diagnosis often lags. My father, whose attitude





cer within the United States – it is among the most lethal forms of the disease, and receives the least funding for research.

There is a fundamental quality to this lifestyle – full-time slow travel – that cannot be ignored and that becomes its greatest asset on days like these, even as it is a great annoyance to one's physical comfort: I live outdoors. I am never far from Nature. I can (and do) go out into it all day and much of the night when I can

with his children as well as with himself was that we were all incapable of getting sick – I had pneumonia the entire summer of 1987 before he at last prescribed for me antibiotics – ignored the problem when he felt a gnawing ache in his stomach until the pain at last became unbearable. By the time he was diagnosed, the cancer was already well-advanced.*

The five-year survival rate is five percent. Three-quarters die within a year. Although it is relatively rare – not even in the top ten among the various types of can-

find the energy, and there are few things more energizing than impending tragedy.

On Oregon beaches I can hear to think; free of visual noise and enveloped in a cozy constant hiss and ionically-charged particles kicked up by the surf, they do not suggest topics to contemplate, but are blank spaces into which I put my own thoughts, to turn them over and look at them closely and without distraction. In Oregon mountains, on the other hand, I am constantly reminded of my own state of living. My heart rate and perspiration and aching joints never allow me to forget that I am alive.

So I go hiking into the mountains on the Fourth of

* Footnote: My father's attitude was hardly unique, among doctors probably particularly. Any persistent pain in the abdomen should be checked by a physician, especially if the pain spreads to the back. If it is caught early, pancreatic cancer is becoming increasingly treatable.



July on a bright, cloudless morning. From the blinding glare of the beach I ascend several hundred feet into the cool haze of a rain forest. South-facing exposures reveal a sunny holiday down the coast, but at the apex it is like a jungle, among the trees that make their own rain.

The cape is surrounded on three sides by Nothing but clear sky and open ocean; the atmosphere on Cape Lookout on such days often becomes iridescent in the fog and half-lit swales: the effect is both warm and coldly clinical, like a sick bed in a hospital, indirect lighting run amok.*

At times, it is very helpful to have a rain forest nearby. The constant need to keep an eye on the slippery ground and the rain out of it causes me to plod carefully with my head down, so that as a result passersby can't see my face, which is just as well. The thing they would see there would be mistaken for effort on this wild, wet trail rather than what it actually is.

Here is the best reason to live near a rain forest: some days the rain is necessary, sometimes the rain can't be done without.

* Footnote: On a similarly foggy morning in August 1943, a B-17 Flying Fortress crashed into the cape with ten airmen on board; one survived. There are dozens of military aircraft crash sites in the Northwest remaining to be found. Some hardcore enthusiasts even spend their weekends seeking them out.



OCTOPUS TREES AND NURSE LOGS

William Clark noticed them: “I observed in many places pine of 3 or 4 feet through growing on the bodies of large trees which had fallen down, and covered

with moss and yet part Sound.”

After a tree falls in the forest, the resulting log and stump – called a snag – becomes a sponge, and is as efficient at storing and transporting water in death as it was in life. Remains of healthy trees, especially slow to decay, serve as lifeboats through the ocean of time for a host of things – bugs, fungi, mosses, bacteria, algae, mushrooms, bugs of every sort and the birds that feed on them. They are known as nurse logs for their beneficence, providing succor for trees that will themselves become nurse logs in time. They exist only in the wild; logged forests have none.

In a recent study, nurse logs contained on average over twenty gallons more water per volume weighed than the soil around them. A young tree gets a boost from the yearlong nutrients that are delivered to it by roots anchored in a nurse log – squeezing the sponge as it grows, wringing every advantage – but is also thus propped above the forest floors that become swamps in winter, and above the leaves of ferns that block out light. The tree gets plenty of water

and sun but not too much.

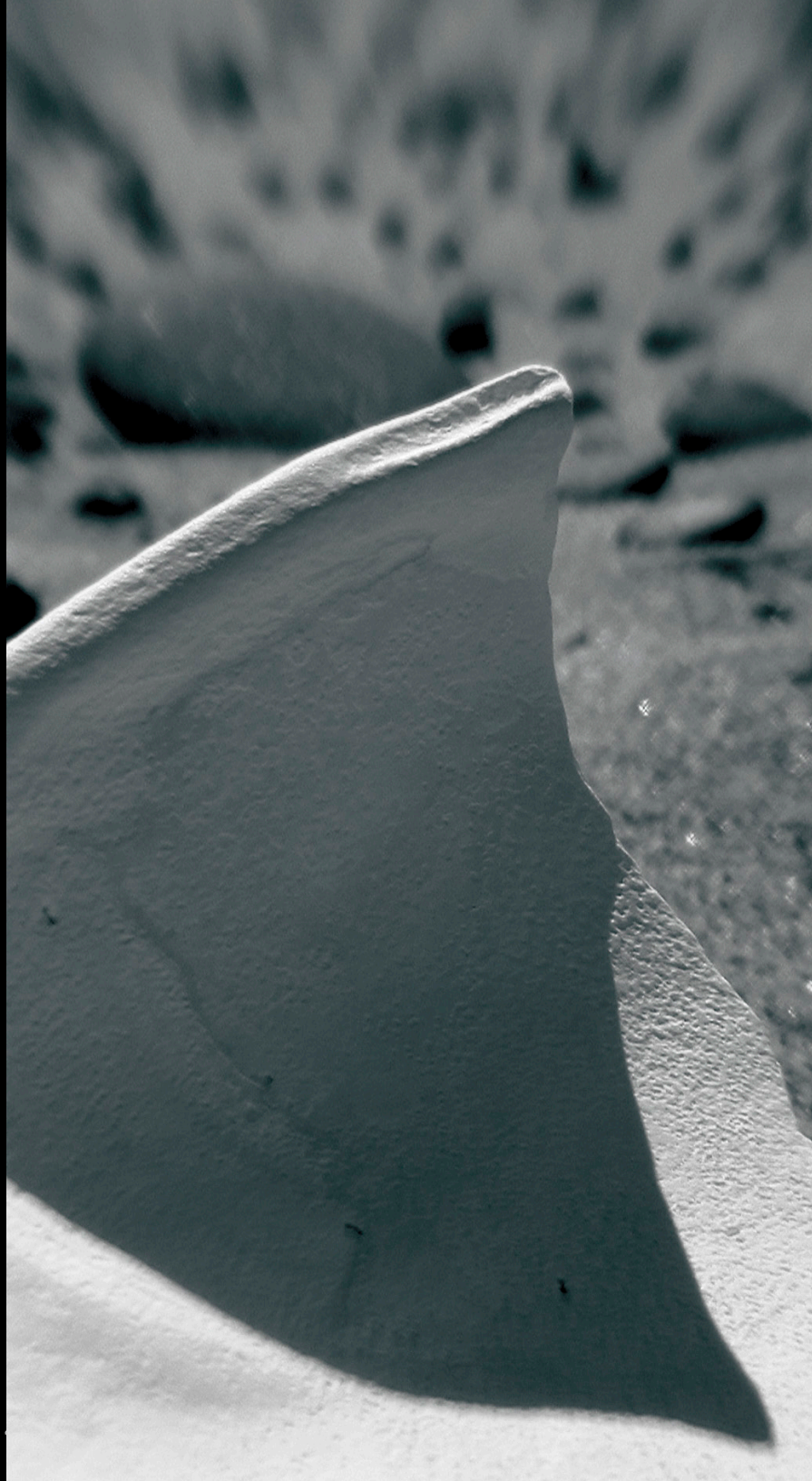
Drift logs on the beach that wash up as convoluted masses often have nurse log pieces tangled in their roots, which, now overturned, still show the frozen embrace of their long-decayed benefactor. Logs washed up as a result of logging always lack these signs, all potential nurse logs having been hauled off with the

rest. Only trees that grow freely in Nature show these empty arms.

Dangle a dead octopus in the extremity of rigor mortis, flash-freeze it, and turn it upside down, and you have a rough approximation of an octopus tree. Rather than a main trunk from which branches diverge, you see an array sprouting from a nearly common point – the young tree has been trimmed repeatedly to encourage a division of growth vigor.

Indians may have tended generations of such trees, perhaps even in groves. They served a utilitarian purpose according to some historians, as handy spots near the sea to store canoes: in autumn canoes were strapped into the crotches of the branches of such trees to keep them above the winter storm surges so they would be waiting when the Indians returned the following spring. There is also speculation that the trees served a religious purpose.

I'm not completely convinced that all of the trees that many consider to be octopus trees are necessarily so. As unlikely as it may sound, a series of accidental amputations could also cause a tree to branch chronically, as can a super-abundance of nutrients and sunshine in a young sapling with a primo spot – like the campsite I had when my neighbor ran face-first into his psychosis – thus causing the profuse branching at low altitudes seen in octopus trees. Moreover, it seems an inordinate number of species in this climate are able to repair themselves prodigiously like muscle that heals back stronger each time, Tommy John surgery for trees. The basic shape speaks of noth-



ing so much as the violence of the winds.

It is not hard to imagine that Indians may have taken the idea of training a sapling to grow as desired as an inspiration when they applied the principle as intimately as they possibly could. They bound tightly-wound tourniquets around the skulls of their children, tightening the bandages such that over time as the children grew their heads became elongated, football-shaped objects, and signs of aesthetic beauty.

Meriwether Lewis describes it: “the most remarkable trait in their physiognomy is the peculiar flatness and width of forehead which they artificially obtain by compressing the head between two boards while in a state of infancy and from which it never afterwards perfectly recovers. this is a custom among all the nations we have met with West of the Rocky mountains. I have observed the heads of many infants, after this singular bandage had been dismissed, or about the age of 10 or eleven months, that were not more than two inches thick about the upper edge of the forehead and reather thinner still higher.”

His traveling companion William Clark was interested in something else in his description of Indians “with large legs & thighs which are generally Swelled from a Stopage of the circulation in the feet (which are Small) by maney Strands of Beeds or curious Strings which are drawn tight around the leg above the ankle....” The Indians of the Northwest coast – like the inland tribes – certainly understood the malleability of youth.

Moderns haven’t completely abandoned such knowledge. There are in various campgrounds, parks, and backyards up and down the coast – often buried deeply in a forest along a side trail, or in day-use areas beside picnic tables, or indeed in the campsites themselves,

where people spend the most time in idle speculation and pointless milling about – shore pines that have been snapped and twisted, placed into an internal and eternal armlock, their branches wedged or otherwise finagled behind themselves and the main trunk of the tree to create artificial Natural Freaks, arboreal mutants created at the hands of mad scientists – kids, mostly – to grow old and big while all the time stuck in the pose they’ve been given, like an action figure in a forgotten junk drawer. Some I have watched for three years as they struggle against (and sometimes collaborate with) their own limbs.

Here is more Pure Fun – it doesn’t kill the tree and turns it into a local landmark, a Natural artwork.

Elsewhere trees have grown around the decapitated but still intact stumps of their forebears, which themselves still show the weird curves in their long-useless roots; these are often still visible as crumbly inner remnants and can be glimpsed through the gaps in the roots of the living tree.

Generation after generation a species occupies a particular site, offspring reclaiming it from the rot of death since well before whites arrived in these forests, a family tree of trees facing the same briny winds over and over. Over the course of decades, new roots grow over the old and the local land bulges under the heaped mass of tree-stuff, a small-scale organic alteration to the local topography built by the mere passage of time. In one place I spy a hemlock sprouting from the living embrace of a cedar: a potential first usurper of the hill-top homestead for a different species.

Wars occur by accident, when two trees try to occupy a



spot fit only for one. One of them somehow out-competes the other – here the math is mind-boggling, too, but a time-lapse video of such a situation would be fascinating to behold – and one of them dies, its branches so intertwined with that of the winner that its corpse clings to it for years, a half-dead set of conjoined twins, or a minuet – a dance with the dead.

Postscript: Here is a curious sidenote and coincidence of language (and telltale sign of a lazy act of research

performed with a search engine):

An internet hoax from 1998 regarding the potential extinction of The Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus – a species of cephalopod supposed to live in trees in the Northwest, and preyed upon by Bigfoot – has been used by educators to point out the basic web illiteracy of American students. In a study, all but one of two dozen students believed the hoax was real, based on nothing but a reasonable-looking website. The absurdist content went right over their heads.

Many people will believe anything they are told, even when it makes no sense. Such situations are dangerous because such people are always easily manipulated. Here is another type of organic branching and mutation – the means by which misinformation (like propaganda, for instance) proliferates.

BIG FOOT TWO: BIG FOOT COME HOME

Indistinct creatures lurk in the dunes. A pair of lumpy brown silhouettes cause the shadows to move; a rustle of shore pines branches – no, the shore pines themselves – the whole trees shiver in the fading evening glow. The two shapes lumber out of the treeline and stomp down to the beach, as uncaring as debarked tourists.

A stench of death and rot surrounds them and blows toward me. I am here in the dunes too, but it seems they cannot see me, or perhaps they don't want to. It is the end of the tourist season and I have been left alone on this beach, to confront alone the twin things crouching low in the surf now, rubbing bellies and breasts and sinewy arms of matted hair, bathing in saltwater and washing out untold varieties of filth. They seem not to see me, but I seem not to see them – mutual blindness. I have to scream but I can't. For I have no mouth.

One of the creatures stands and twists its form to glance

in my direction briefly before his eyes lock on – he has me now. He sees me and I sure as hell see him. I see Big Foot.

That it is a hoax doesn't matter. That it didn't really happen but in a dream – has been invented in my subconscious of the whole cloth of movies and books and television shows and the darkness around me – is beside the point. It is how I imagine my encounter with Bigfoot going down some day, here in the particulate fading beach light at low tide. For my purposes, the fantasy is enough.

There is value in the ability to pretend for a while at least that everything is not as it seems – that there is far more at work here than the eye can behold, and that the only reason we don't know is because we're unable or unwilling to ask the right questions. I prefer the possibility that Bigfoot might exist to a definite answer either way. If I saw Bigfoot with my own eyes it would be a disappointment because in my mind at least – where I decide how I am going to see the world and where the limits of possibility might lie – the myth will be gone. It is my ability to redefine the limits of my imagination – indeed, if any need exist – that matters. A failure of the imagination being the worst kind, it would be far worse – worse even than being wrong – to be unable to imagine the existence of Bigfoot at all.

This attitude seems disingenuous to me as I write it. I know the Bigfoot legend can never be fully disproved, and to see it proved beyond scientific doubt would be a spectacular confirmation of the limitless possibilities of Nature. But the myth of Bigfoot has become a myth in itself, and provides an iconic archetype: The American Seeker, the earnest soloist who in the face of scorn and shaky evidence is convinced that all is not as it seems and we must come to discover where we got it wrong

and why, that the truth is really out there somewhere, lurking in shadows.

There are Seekers so dedicated that after long cold nights stalking him through the forest and dry dusty days chasing his clues up mountain paths they come to resemble the very creature they seek.

There is, I'm sure, a lesson here too.



If a remnant population of creatures from Asia managed to recently make a way to North America, and if they ritualistically burned the bodies and bones of their ancestors, the lack of evidence in the fossil record might not be the deal-breaker it first seems. This sounds like nothing more than idle speculation and wishful thinking, but then, of such things are legends made.

The suggestion that given the activity of hunters and campers in these forests some of them must surely have seen the creatures if they were here has two problems with it. Firstly, they *have* been seen – reports of sightings most frequently come from these people. Second, from what I've seen of them – their general lack of observational skills and the acuteness of their misunderstandings about Nature and how it works, a weakness common to many of them – I see no special difficulty involved in hiding from them. They are loud, unobservant and impatient as a whole. If an intelligent human with good survival skills could easily hide in these dense and brush-screened forests, surely a creature – especially one with the speed and intelligence Bigfoot is claimed to have – could pull it off.

Not knowing the truth about Big Foot really isn't a problem. The evidence each way is drawn in the margins of the virtual doodle pad of the thought experiment involved. The legend is a doodle made of fuzzy stick figures, a skookum, a thing of no lasting consequence. This legend is Fun, and Fun it shall stay.

BOUQUET FROM A STRANGER

I am in a foul mood as I arrive at my campsite – I estimate it is about my two hundred and fiftieth, all told. I am tired of traveling and the constant movement. I've got long-term-motion sickness. It is late spring again and I am cold and wet and tired, as much so as the gunbarrel-gray sky. I have been watching it all day as it has systematically snuffed out every potential opening, killing in the womb every chance at sun.

But I discover the bouquet of flowers that has been thrown into the firepit – what is now my firepit, at least for a while – at the moment that a sudden glimpse of daylight descends and lights it up for me in a quick flash of bright yellow and withered green, and it has not been thrown but placed upright in a plastic cup half-filled with rainwater – it has simply fallen over. It has been deliberately left here where I, whoever I might be, will find it.

Campsites are places rented to the public at large for the purposes not only of sleeping here, but of living here. This makes campsites similar to hotel rooms in a way, except that the sites once they are vacated are given only a fairly cursory inspection (there's not much to it) by a campground host before it is ready for the next set of campers. Things get left behind by accident sometimes, but the bouquet is another matter. It has been left deliberately for me. The hosts, if they visited this site before I arrived, chose to leave this bouquet rather than throw it out.

The remnants of other campers are everywhere, and

every time they are unique. Many are collected on the beach and forgotten, abandoned, or simply not taken Home: sand dollars and shells, driftwood, rocks, strands of seaweed and kelp, plastic and styrofoam fishing floats and water-worn nylon nets.

Most of the manmade artifacts are fairly benign and related to food, tobacco, or booze. Some are more eloquent: lost earrings and bracelets, hair picks, barrettes, lipsticks and false fingernails – girls were here; or half-melted plastic army men, tatters of comic books, doll's heads and strategically placed wads of gum (or worse) – one or more boys.

I watch things decay in firepits during the dormant winter months – plastic cups turning to crumbly yellow bits and cigarette butts becoming frayed clusters of fibers, partly-used campfire wood falling apart slowly, the charred bones of Fun. Places haunted by memories of parties: this is how it sometimes looks when camping alone in wintertime.

I set the bouquet upright and top off the makeshift vase with fresh water. The flowers are mostly nonnative orchids, daisies, Queen Anne's lace and various dried twigs still speckled with dumbbell-shaped seed pods that make noise when I rattle them. It is not uncommon to find improvised decorations picked from Nature by campers and left behind, but this one has been professionally arranged, with careful use of tissue paper and colored translucent cellophane.

Why someone would have an expensive bouquet of flowers at a campsite in the first place is anyone's guess. Given my accumulated knowledge of such places, mine is that there was a birthday or graduation party, or perhaps a wedding anniversary. Given the color scheme, they are obviously intended to cheer someone up, but

that doesn't necessarily mean that they were sad to begin with.

More ominously, the flowers could have been meant as a gift of consolation. The bouquet seems somewhat superfluous in this place at this time of year – wildflowers choke hiking trails, rhododendrons are fully ablaze, and cheerful orange salmonberries dangle from bushes, snacks for a wild array of bugs, birds, and kids newly freed from school for the summer.

I repurpose the bouquet in accord with an ancient Pacific Northwestern tradition and recycle it. These are *my* flowers now.

I once discovered a dream cache, the dumped remains of burned bits of wood and rubbish and a goldmine for the amateur archaeologist of (very) recent history. Rangers periodically dig the accumulated ashes – and all else that campers have dumped into firepits over the months and years – from all the sites in the campground, and the rangers at this one have disposed of it all on a remote service road that only recklessly wandering campers like me would ever discover.

One of the things I find is to my imagination dripping with significance, mystery, and despair, but it just as easily could have been a random accident, a stray spark from a campfire that landed in the wrong place, for example, perhaps something so Funny it was elevated to anecdote status: “Remember that time we went camping and my school books went up in smoke?”

What catches my eye are the fluttering pages of a book with a charred spine. Black bits of pages sheer off in a swirling breeze. I pick up the unfortunate book and thumb through the flame-chewed prose still stinky

with soot.

It is a textbook, but it is obviously written for a general readership. It is an introductory text on child psychology.

“Using a camera was almost a relief. It interposed a slight barrier between myself and the horror in front of me.”

– Margaret Bourke-White, on her photos of Buchenwald

“Photography is a marvelous discovery, a science that has attracted the greatest intellects, an art that excites the most astute minds – and one that can be practiced by any imbecile.”

– Gaspard Félix Tournachon



DOWN BY THE JETTY

I see two small boats a few hundred feet from shore riding on heavy ocean surf, with Coast Guard helicopters hovering above them periodically drifting off to buzz nearby headlands – en route to an emergency or just hanging out, it's sometimes hard to tell. I've seen them both practicing rescue operations and conducting real ones. Sometimes they zip by in the surf on ATVs without time to chat.*

IV

Some people take their boats into heavy waves for Fun, unwittingly reincarnating an adventure sport that Coast Indians used to play with specially designed, two-way canoes.

I am not thinking about the ocean in the slightest when the sneaker wave that finally gets me – *my* sneaker wave – does so, leaving me about two seconds to contemplate what will happen when the wall of water – twenty feet away Now, and Now ten – hits me. There is no way at all to contemplate the frigidity of the water that nails me, even in retrospect. For perhaps the first time in my life, I find out what genuine physical

* Footnote: Here is a new spectator sport just waiting for a sponsor: watching the Coast Guard practice search and rescue operations in choppers and action yachts. The only things missing are bikini babes frolicking in the surf and Kenny Loggins music.

shock does to the brain.

It is hard to brace oneself using only one's legs, but I nonetheless assume an awkward pose in the two seconds I have, perhaps looking a bit like a plastic army man before the sun and the boys in short pants with magnifying glasses get to me. I am knocked onto my knees and the force of the wave carries me inland until I can at last rise to my feet – submerged to my waist – and prepare for the worst moment, and one that I have time to see coming. I look back to the landline and it is absurdly far away and there is nothing but fizzy blue-white water between me and the first clumps of beachgrass in the extended distance.

All that water has to come back the way it arrived. The feeling is like driving to an early-morning root canal.

Strong legs and the advantage of a state of near-panic are what save me.* The volume of the water and the physics in play are trying to pull me out to sea, and while I stagger and fall a time or two and all the pushing with my legs rapidly tires me, I am fighting less water with each moment that passes – allowing a certain

* Footnote: As well, perhaps, as my habit of walking barefoot. I am able to wedge my toes into the sand – which accumulates as the wave rolls out, such that I am buried up to my calves in it by the time it is over.



volume of water to move past me without being myself moved: in the end it comes down to basic mathematics again.

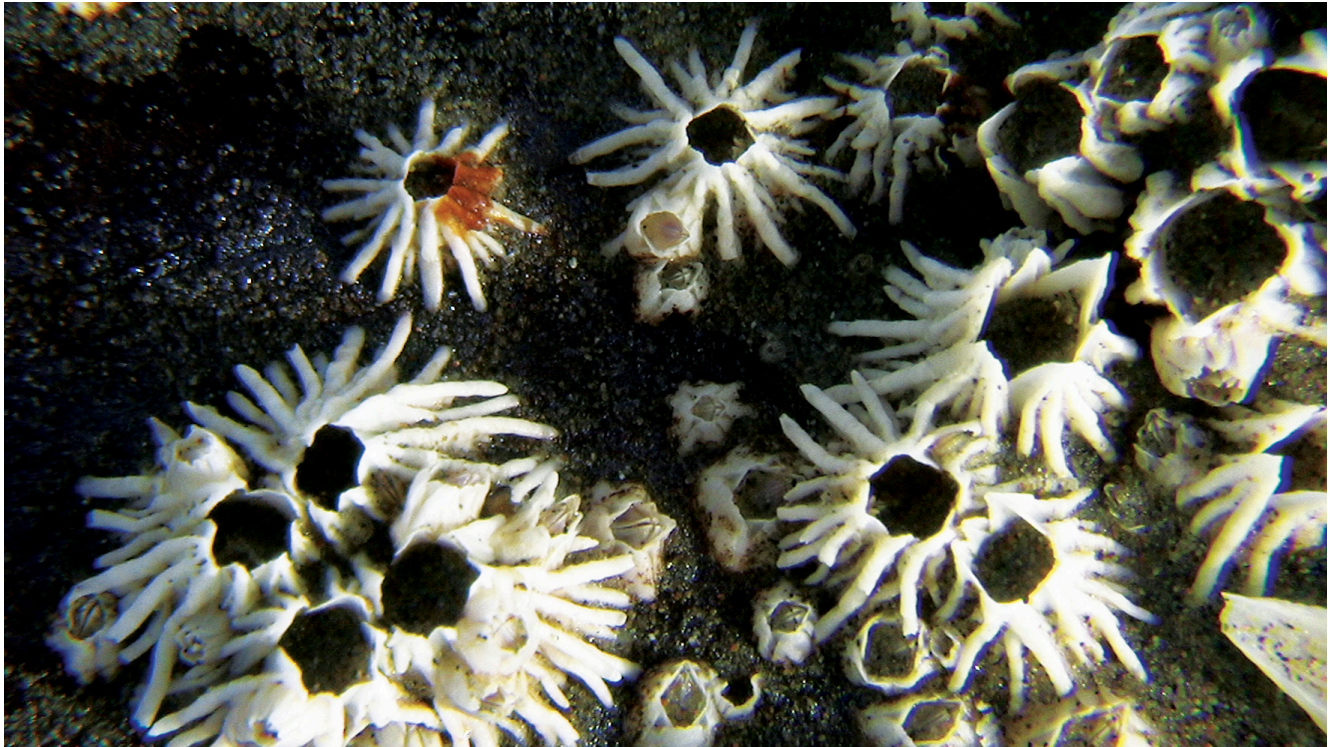
Most people who have lived on the coast and like to walk on beaches can probably tell similar stories; some, of course, cannot. While I am staying at South Beach a vacationing couple are washed off the jetty and I watch the Coast Guard search for them. It is a long search that doesn't end well, but I am reminded to be careful each time I come to the jetty by the sight of makeshift memorials such as those often seen along Roads.

I watch a chubby, almost-naked middle-aged man stomp bravely into the churning waves on the first cloudy day in weeks, making at the sea a countercharge of Fun. He ducks under the waves like a surfer waiting for a good ride until an especially large wave tumbles him sideways and holds him under three feet of water, for about three seconds. When he wanders out of it all

D O W N B Y T H E J E T T Y

about ten seconds later, his silhouette is sheepish, quick alternate glances thrown back over each shoulder time and again, dripping and with his head down but his chin up for the benefit of the progeny of this patriarch. They applaud him as they watch him emerge.

precious time as if it were free, as if life weren't short enough. The tenor of the day is not far from the sluggish late spring afternoons I remember from my summers in Arizona, when in the triple digit-glare of sunshine that is never broken by clouds, a siesta can last all day. This is what is happening now – Nothing – but



L O - F I HUMIDIFIERS

I am sleepwalking through an afternoon in one of the coast's few cities, haphazardly wandering, killing

I can't blame the heat because there is none. I am laz-
ing through a movie-matinee sort of day, the kind of
afternoon one is meant to permanently abandon after
college except in the rare pseudo-sitcomesque air in-
habited by the temporarily unemployed and maritally
alienated, by those just out of jail or returned from a
war – a brief return to the hazy afternoons of early post-

adolescence, popcorn and laundromats, arcade games at a strip mall and a slab of greasy pizza: coin-op everything.

It is a day out of time and I am floating – like the day Michael Jackson died.

I enter a thrift store that used to be a mechanic's garage – I trip over grates in the stained cement floor that conceal what used to be a grease monkey's pit. A few sparrows flit about in the beams of the high, skylit ceiling, but the big space is so choked with stuff – junk, to some – that the effect is cozy and warm.

I begin to browse through the book section – even the lowliest thrift store has one – and forget, as I always do, what I was actually shopping for. The books are old and utterly random. They smell nice, if a bit musty and moisture-bound. As I leaf through them I take a passing interest in topics far removed from my usual fare, things I had not been thinking about before waking – romance on high seas and in back alleys, encyclopediae of coinage and stamps, pictures of various breeds of horses with erections, artillery manuals, and other well-worn books for whom I can't imagine there ever being a readership, and stray acquaintances that I like to imagine as the authors. It is typical of the day, bumbling through a grab-bag of ideas, considering taking



several home with me; but books are expensive weight-wise in a lifestyle like mine, and I know that if I buy one I will buy two and then ten. I flip through a stack of old long-playing albums instead, but I don't even own a record player anymore, like most of the patrons here.*

When the clerk comes over to chat I am rummaging through a big pile of small electronics. There is a matching set of dusty old humidifiers which reminds me that I am looking for a small ceramic space heater.** Along with three speed settings and an oscillation switch, one of the humidifiers has a stereo headphone jack and volume control on the side, and scan, reverse, and fast-forward buttons (but no tuning dial or place to insert a cassette or CD). For the life of me I'm still not sure why. The faded stickers that warn about various health hazards of the product are silent on the topic of

* Footnote: I always browse the book sections in thrift stores for the same reason I always look under bridges: I never know what I'm going to find. I have found an uncanny number of erstwhile favorites this way, like a registered, hardbound copy of R. H. Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* for two bucks. I could have had a similarly handsome copy of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* for the same price, the only volumes remaining from a complete set.

** Footnote: I discovered the value of space heaters in autumn in Oklahoma, when I bought one at a department store that shares a parking lot with a spectacular Chinese restaurant – I was conducting an informal coast-to-coast survey of them in search of the ultimate hot & sour soup. That one space heater spared me untold dollars in propane costs that winter, as it heats the whole trailer at the cost of about eight amps of shore power, when it is available. Every winter visitor to the coast's campground should have one, so long as it is of the type that shuts off when knocked over.





its purpose.

“Do you know what these headphone jacks are for?” I ask the clerk, who shakes her head. Now we are both stumped. We check other things to see if they also have jacks – humidifiers and purifiers, space heaters of the type I am not looking for – but none of them do. Of the twin mystery products I will get no closure.

The clerk sends me on my way with another little enigma.

“I don’t even know if they work,” she says.

Postscript: I will stop again on a whim at the same store two years later, and the mystery humidifiers are still

there, still maybe but maybe not working but definitely still waiting to find a Home. I notice a detail I hadn’t before – a battery compartment so that they will still function if the power goes out.

Tsunami: Waiting for a Disaster That Has Already Happened (Or, Waiting for the Same Disaster to Happen Again)

I sleep like a rock. Rather, I'm worse than a rock. Rocks can, with a little effort, at least be moved. I am apparently utterly immobile and immovable, unwakeable in spite of efforts I am told about when at last, in my own time, I open my eyes. Most days require considerable expense of time and coffee before I am truly awake following a sound slumber, and I usually don't remember a thing. Maybe the rock metaphor is more apt than I suppose, after all.

All turns out to be cold and still in the pre-dawn air as I open my door on the park ranger who is pounding – miraculously, it seems, loudly enough for me to hear it – on the side of my trailer, at half past four. That's A.M. But I don't remember opening the door itself, just everything that follows.

Something in his voice carries the same rude immediacy of boiling coffee – genuine fear – and his words slap me in the face with all the urgency of the present tense. “An earthquake just hit Japan,” he says. “Thousands

are dead and one of their nuclear reactors is melting down. There's a tsunami, and it's coming our way.”

No one knows what, if anything, is coming, but there is something in the way he pauses before he goes, asks me twice if I understand that he and everyone else is leaving the campground and I am the last to be roused before they go, and the way he holds eye contact an unusually long time before leaving, looking widely into my own sleep-starved eyes longer than is customarily considered casual – or comfortable.

I get the message. I tell him I will be at the evacuation site when the time comes – I have three hours because the tidal waves are still racing across the great ocean. I say goodbye and hastily begin to brew a half-pot of coffee, to go along with the breakfast fare I *didn't* order – a fat, sloppy slice of early morning Doom.

My first thoughts are for myself and my cats, but we won't be in real danger – the evacuation site is just over the bridge in Newport, on a high piece of ground overlooking the jetties at the mouth of the Umpqua River. The trailer – and all my possessions inside it – is a tougher problem to solve. Not only are my most critical things traveling with me, but so are the accumulated photos and notes I would like to turn into a book someday, and the trailer is in a “tsunami zone” – an area guaranteed to be obliterated when The Big One comes.

Like the ranger said, at this point, no one knows.

I compromise and leave the trailer but take my notebooks and one backup hard drive with most of the shots I have taken. Having already crossed the country with them, the cats are an annoyance but that is all. They are veterans of The Road – unfazed and unfazable. As

my truck warms I carry them out one by one and stuff them inside it, along with a clean litter box and some dry food – to be foodless for even a few hours being an injustice beyond contemplation.

As expected, we are the last to leave the campground. In the dead of winter the place is only about five percent occupied, but the sudden lack of all campers whatsoever, the hastily abandoned trailers and half-empty sites – the owner of one motorhome has disconnected from the water and electric hookups and left the cables in a heap, leveling blocks still in place on the parking apron – and creepy stillness of the dawn air put a shiver in my spine. It is as if the tsunami has already struck, or at least half-struck. I lean a bit harder on the accelerator of my groggy pickup, merge onto a busy Highway 101 and roll over the bridge, shielding my eyes from the

sun rising over the mountains on one side of me and glancing warily at the sea rising on the other.

The scene at the evacuation site is more that of a carnival than a disaster-in-progress. It is filling with people who would otherwise be at work or still at home in bed. The day will be spectacular and dry – on this side of the ocean if not the other – under a sparkling midwinter sun that warms the air quickly. Many will spend the rest of the unseasonable morning on vacation – a “tsunami day,” not unlike the days of snow elsewhere in the country that sometimes force schools to close early or never open.

Not only is the high ground here relatively safe from all but the biggest tsunamis, but it is a most picturesque spot to ride out a natural disaster. Both the low,



random dunes by the north jetty and the jumble of rocks and wooding pilings composing the south jetty typically provide good photo opportunities at sunset or sunrise of perhaps the most photogenic – and most photographed – bridge on the entire coast: old town harbor in the background, perhaps a few silhouettes of yawping seals fore.

Here I wait for a tsunami but have brought my camera, of course, as has nearly ever other human being I see, like the opening or closing ceremony of an Olympiad.



Photography would seem to be an oddball in this regard – I doubt painters often have to worry about hordes of lay-painters showing up with their own canvasses and easels when they are contemplating their masterpieces. But photography is easy and cheap, like Rock ‘n’ Roll, so I try to talk about apertures and the like with my fellow evacuees.

I arrive after most of the tourists but before most of the locals, many of whom must have found other places to be – Newport is a bigger city than this, even in January. Many who do show up have clearly just left the highway while on the way somewhere else, to watch the water or the people – it seems to be a bit of both. Many sip coffee and scarf down breakfast from cellophane wrappers held to their faces.

Most of the cars parked alongside me or winding slowly through the park have pets inside of them. Yipping and yowling dogs and cats sit uncomfortably on laps or press faces, paws, and tongues to the insides of windows. In an ideal world, my own cats sit quietly purring, cozy and curled up asleep in the back seat. In this less than ideal one they crawl into and over everything in the small space of the truck, clawing like rats. Torgo howls with anxiety and recrimination like he always does at times of stress.

He has joined the Pets United Tsunami Chorus, lead tenor and the lungs to prove it.

A lighthouse and rather martial-looking Coast Guard station overlook the little cliffside park. On the steps stand a group of people in business suits whom I take to be meteorologists from the weather service or specialists from the marine center across the harbor, scientists and government agents chatting coolly and casually about the situation. But from the Coast



Guard tower men and women in hats and uniforms keep one eye on the ocean through binoculars and another on us; police cars move slowly amongst us, both as fellow evacuees and fellow gawkers.

I fidget – waiting is no longer my style. Nonetheless, we all wait and watch the sea.

We watch and wait and watch. As the moment of estimated arrival of the first wave comes and goes without incident, it begins to become apparent that this won't be The Big One and may barely qualify as a little one. We begin to look a little less at the waves and a little more at one another.

“Do you see anything?” a woman indiscriminately asks all of us milling nearby.

“It looks like the tide is going out,” a voice says weakly.

“Does the horizon look a little weird to you?” asks another.

The waterline has indeed receded by about one hundred feet, and the horizon line is indeed a little weird, although exactly what has changed is much harder to define. It may be that the recession of the water – the deep inhalation a tsunami takes

before the first wave strikes – has altered its depth such that the waves begin to break at different points – closer or further from observers on land – and an optical illusion occurs, or seems to occur to those actively looking for such things.

As the first waves arrive, other odd things begin to happen – they begin to break in strange places and at atypical angles. Rivers begin to flow backwards.

“It just looks weird,” says the woman next to me. “Nature shouldn’t look like that.”

I smile. It is exhilarating, actually, like the world has not quite been turned upside-down but shaken slightly as if in a snow globe. They have not yet begun to assess the damage done to Japan and at any rate I have been oblivious to what may be happening to others ever since early this morning, when *my* day began unexpectedly too. For Now it is sort of Fun.

It is like a low tide followed immediately by a high tide, repeated several times in a somewhat randomized cycle. I liken a mild tsunami to a series of flash floods – there is suddenly much more water than there was a moment before, and this inflow accounts for the brief spasms of violence while the water level stabilizes and the waterline reaches its apex and begins to recede once again.

The tsunami I am witnessing has crossed an ocean and devastated a nation – we will learn over the days and weeks to come just how destructive it was, when the sun rises in Japan and the scale of the disaster begins to dominate the twenty-four hour news cycle – but here and now in Newport the tail end of the tsunami is barely noticeable as a series of little oddities in the behavior



of the harbor and the river where it meets the sea.*

The mildness reminds me of the way that the atmosphere grows cooler and the sunlight less intense in the midst of a partial solar eclipse – the symptoms of the event are evident even when the event itself is illusive. It is hard to tell what, but *something* is a little off, and suddenly before me is an otherwise inexplicable function of Nature and mathematics. I wonder if this is how the ancients felt.

As I watch the sea slosh between the jetties and in and out of the harbor, I try to find out what else might be going on, or if the Fun might be over. I have been tuning my radio periodically to a morning zoo team from Portland – far removed from any repercussions for their personal safety – checking in with disembodied voices who jabber in the same incoherent tones regarding the disaster that they use for their advertising plugs. They repeat warnings about the tsunami as they are received (and as required by law and conscience) but they are betrayed by their own zaniness – as a major radio station they would have had access to hard facts and instant updates all morning.**

They've known all along that this isn't The Big One. They've been milking it for the novelty value. Shame on them. I browse to one of the music stations still

* Footnote: As I watch the waves in Newport, a man in California is hiking up a ravine, and the waves are about to wash into it and carry him out to sea. His body will wash up weeks later at Fort Stevens State Park, near the remains of the *Peter Iredale*.

** Footnote: Along with other Pacific islands, Hawaii serves as a bit of an early warning system for the West Coast. A lack of major damage further out to sea may or may not indicate what will happen when the waves reach the far more massive North American continent – the mathematics of the physics involved are simply different.



programming per schedule before I switch the radio off completely.

Postscript: The tsunami washed to sea much of the infrastructure of the Japanese coast – piers, boats, houses, cars and motorcycles, miscellaneous chunks of plastic and wood and styrofoam, whatever floats and doesn't disintegrate in seawater – that is currently floating like shaving scum on the surface of the Pacific Ocean, coming this way. The Japanese Current naturally brings debris to the Oregon Coast – ancient Japanese castaways adrift from a shipwreck if able to survive the crossing would have ended up here.

Over the coming months and years this debris will all wash up on our beaches, a process that has already started. Oregon state parks have set up special collection points for beachgoers to bag and drop tsunami debris as if it were dog poop, a necessary precaution to attempt to halt the invasive mussels and sea stars that have crossed the ocean clinging to the sides.

POISON BEER

I like to use the Mom and Pop grocery stores in small towns when the prices are reasonable, which they are more often than one might suppose, or they have better food. Many such shops keep fresh fruit, vegetables, bread, and seafood year-round, which is worth the extra expense in winter, before the farmer's markets are open. I often have little choice. Mega-super-gigantogroceries are few and far between here, confined to the

larger cities. Even when they are available I like to use the smaller stores, where each transaction means more.

I am passing the meat section – the butcher trims and partitions fresh meat in front of customers' eyes through a window placed too high for small faces to see through – in one such store on the North Coast in a small town through which 101 doesn't pass directly; the main street is just a street, not a numbered highway.

I am looking for a cold beer.

The beer sections here – even in gas stations and convenience stores but especially in little markets like this one – are rich in bright colors and colorful names. The small brewers of the area draw the eye with clever product packaging and nomenclature – and branding, of course: logos that mix pastels and neon, bold block lettering and post-modernist lowercase, monkeys and Indian symbology and abstracted designs that must be studied carefully – presumably while sipping the suds within – to be visually comprehended. If done well, these are products that are genuinely Fun to shop for, and especially consume.*

A girl of about four is shopping with her mother while two other unaffiliated shoppers mill nearby – we are all shopping for beer.

“Can't we just get a different kind of beer for Daddy?” the girl asks her mother. The woman giggles nervously, the rest of us exchange knowing looks and smiles.

“Okay. What kind should we get?” she asks her daughter.

* Footnote: And the more I drink the clearer the messages become, like magic.



ter.

She points at a six pack from Rogue, a brewer based in Newport. “The poison kind?” the girl suggests. She is pointing at a product with a cartoon of a discombobulated drunken skeleton on it called Dead Guy Ale, and

one of my favorites.

Twelve percent of all beer consumed in Oregon has been brewed here. A two-billion-dollar industry within the state – employing five thousand people at last count

– the microbrewing scene has thrived thanks to a state law that allows beer to be brewed, sold, and consumed on the same property. The law resulted in shelf space for small brewers to compete with the large national brewers, and a spirit of competition has resulted in a perennial renewal of innovation. Not only do the most popular microbrews compete directly with one another year-round, but seasonal releases (and other, more experimental limited releases) have resulted in scenarios whereby the beer section at my local grocery store changes with the weather and angle of the sun: I have my favorite summer and winter beers now, which may seem a bit pretentious, but there it is.

It is a perfectly formed organic chain of production and commerce, it seems. Hops are grown locally – they rise all summer in the Willamette Valley, where they ripen as conical flowertops under shade-screens suspended from networks of poles and wires that remind me of the electrical grids on the ceilings of bumper-car arenas. The hops are fermented by people who are highly passionate about the quality of their products and the beer is sold fresh from the brewery to tourists and others eager to drink deeply of local color from chilled

bottles and mugs.*

Moreover, the brewpub law and the pervasive local culture have helped turn microbrewing into a thriving local hobby. Home-brewing has a long history in the Northwest, longer even than the moonshine stills of Appalachia or the backyard gins of the Great Depression. The Chinook word “hotchenoo” – homemade liquor – is supposed to be the source of the slang term “hootch.”



Six-packs can be broken up in Oregon. You don't have to buy all six beers.

It is the kind of place where my supermarket checkout clerk has to check with her boss when I purchase single bottles of several brands of beer – to research the topic, a

Fun self-assignment for a book I am working on – to ask if beers from Oregon should be taken from the “Domestic” per-bottle price list and those from California and Washington from the sheet labeled “Imports.”

* Footnote: Even if you don't like beer, a trip to an Oregon brewery can be fascinating in the same way it was when on his children's television show Mister Rogers would leave his studio and visit various industrial locations: the bustle of modern industry can be sensually intoxicating in itself. Many brewers also make root beers that can be sipped from chilled mugs, too; a big enthusiast, I'm anticipating an Oregon Root Beer Boom to follow the current “real beer” boom in due time.



The dominant beer style in the Northwest is the India pale ale, or IPA. IPAs differ from nationalized (i.e. corporation-owned) beers – which tend to be lagers and pilsners – in relation to the “hoppiness” of the beer. To some it is unpleasantly or pleasantly bitter, to others crisp and refreshing (and to those accustomed to the lighter beers brewed elsewhere, often initially nigh-undrinkable) – which itself is a result of measures taken by brewers in Victorian England to preserve English

beers during their long sea voyages to India, thus also providing the name.

IPAs seem to be strong in about four ways but so perfectly balanced that the result is still stable and drinkable, like sticks of firewood stacked into a conical pile held up by its own internal conflict. Of such things my father used to tell me they would “put hair on my chest.”



There's my favorite from Lagunitas – Wilco Tango Foxtrot Ale: A Malty, Robust, Jobless Recovery Ale – a joke in the title and another joke in the subtitle. I love this beer. It tastes smooth to me, but then my tastebuds are used to a degree of harshness above and beyond those of most outside the Northwest. It tastes the most like pure beer to me, in a way that makes it possible for me to imagine I'm taking sepia-toned photographs and wearing loafers, riding out the dustbowl in a bathtub. Bob's yer uncle. *

Total Domination from Ninkasi Brewery in Eugene was interesting to watch, from a consumer standpoint. I took a chance on it when it was relatively rare on store shelves, and for about two months it seemed a private pleasure. Then it began turning up first in smaller grocery stores, then in the larger chain stores, then in gas stations – now it might be the most ubiquitous beer on the coast that is brewed somewhere else.

Of the brewers on the Oregon Coast itself, Fort George in Astoria has taken an interesting tack to set itself apart. It is one of the few brewers to release beers in aluminum cans. Rather than using the plastic networks of nooses that big brewers use and that strangle seabirds, the cans use an alternative packaging that holds the four-packs together without killing animals.

With a wit that shames the surgeon general and his humorless health warnings, brewers of the region aren't afraid to express themselves verbally, beer labels raised perhaps not quite to the level of high art but well beyond the morbid slogans and catchphrase-jokes of the big brewers. We are given obscure references, clever

* Footnote: California brewer Lagunitas also makes Lagunitas Sucks Ale, which is marketed as if it were – and it might well have been – a one-off accident at the brewery. I tried it once. It tasted awful.

wordplay, riddles and mind games, forgotten fragments of weird history, notes on the brewing process, sardonic screeds against some aspect of the industry – no doubt a few inside jokes meant only to be comprehended by a select few drinkers. These last provide bountiful dry kindling for the imaginations of the uninitiated, as inside jokes often do to those on the outside. Correctly-executed beer label gibberish is mysterious and outwardly wise, nonsensical, absurd, and sophomoric.

Some of it makes sense as math. Many brewers print a beer's IBU rating – which measures the bitterness of a given beer due to the hops – and its specific gravity – a measure of its density – and the specific types of hops and malts used: the kinds of things aficionados appreciate. In other words, the brewers don't assume stupidity or ignorance on the part of their customers, a respect that is the polar opposite of ad campaigns meant to titillate and pacify consumers into buying mass-produced beer dumped into cans and bottles in industrial centers in the Midwest, beer that tastes to me now like unprocessed vomit.

Postscript: In the early morning hours at some campgrounds, noises rise from strange creatures of shadowy form, crouched over in the deepest bushes and crannies – the mighty heaves of over-inebriated campers. They are used to weak beer with low alcohol content and are now choking on our IPAs, which often have alcohol percentages approaching ten percent. Care should be taken here.

CROP CIRCLES ON A BEACH

I am climbing to the top of a beach cliff to return to my truck parked at the viewpoint at the top, to return home to the campground and the trailer. It is an afternoon in winter that feels like an evening in summer. The sky is beyond overcast – unbroken but thin cloud cover has given the beach the aura of a resort spa – a brilliant, pervasive soft glow, a triumph of dispersed light courtesy Mother Nature.*

An old man on the beach traces symbols in the sand with a stick. He drags the stick behind him, making smooth grooves in fine wet sand. I didn't notice him while I was down there, but from up here he forms a roving, crooked shadow that leaves a trail behind it, a moving line that leaves others, like a cursor. Sometimes he works freehand, sometimes he circles a central point to which his stick is attached by a frayed piece of dirty nylon rope torn from a washed-up fishing net.

From up here, *he* is the central point, the only moving figure amongst the intricate curves and primal symbols he has created. The shapes and symbols don't spell anything or seem to have any literal meaning at all. Some are geometrical shapes with straight or perfectly-arc'd lines, others made of squiggles and malformed

* Footnote: The Oregon Coast has periods of relative warmth and dryness that sometimes settle over the area for a week or two (I observe one that lasts nearly a month) known locally as February Fairs. These complete flip-flops of the prevailing seasonal weather patterns remind me of winter rains in Tucson, which also tend to come all at once and linger briefly before normality returns. If you can time your vacation right, February Fairs can be spectacular.

gouges that resemble cuneiform but I am too distant to decipher any of them anyway. He looks like an ancient surveyor at work, or the high leader of a solitary cult, drawing symbols in the sand for a rite beyond my comprehension.

From the top of the cliff my angle is better and I can see the big picture more clearly.* My cult leader has acquired a few disciples recruited from those passing by. Three people have joined him – their body language suggests that they don't know the man, only one another – and they have found sticks of their own. They add embellishments and new elements to the grand drawing, which is more random – more improvised – than I had previously imagined.

They are doing all of this merely for the Fun of it. I am tired and want only to go Home, but I sit on a bench instead to watch their Fun unfold. Half an hour passes.

Drawn by the activity, two separate photographers with tripods materialize. One of them has brought a dog who has been trained to loiter in the master's peripheries while he sets up – the tableau of sand remains undisturbed by paws. Again, from apologetic waves and animated but casual head nods and the way the photographers approach the old man to request permission I can tell they are strangers to one another.

The scene plays out easily and without subtext, merely another lazy afternoon at the beach. Here is a somewhat more adult version of sand castles, things made of sand for no evident reason, no hierarchy of decision-

makers, no industry, no paycheck waiting at the end. They make the symbols and patterns because they can: the spontaneous Fun of freedom.

It is the ephemeral nature of the art – if this impromptu play can be called art, which I believe it can – that keeps me watching. The things people create on, of, or in sand will never last very long. People know this going in, and I think the thrill of the implicitly Doomed quality of their work imparts a freedom to play and experiment with zero consequences – whatever is created will be destroyed by the end of the day anyway – that liberates them and is the reason behind the swirls that even at this distance I can discern in the body language: we may as well go nuts!

As a photographer I am not unaccustomed to the wrenchings of the gut associated with a missed opportunity – the light shifts unexpectedly, or I discover I've made an error in my calculations that others may not notice but I will see every time I look at my shot, glaring back at me like a victorious gremlin – but when I do get it right and grab the opportunity, I fiddle and fuss over it, protect it with my life or risk my life to get it. I see a deep shade of pure black when I think I'll lose it. I might accidentally delete it or, worse, misplace the memory card that contains a whole week's work.

The Fun being had will leave no trace, and they all understand this going into it. The photographers might get a good shot or two, but otherwise no one profits nor is anyone hurt. The people on the beach below me know their work – both their success and their failures – will be wiped away by the next high tide. Sure as the orbit of the moon, it *will* be gone, and in an instant.

The people scatter when the first big wave of the

* Footnote: Beach cliffs give a three-quarters, top-down perspective. It is possible to judge distances – and therefore motives – more precisely. Moreover, they are safe from all waves except perhaps tsunamis.

changing tide rolls in – sticks dropped, bags hastily slung around shoulders, and a mad scamper for high ground. One of the photographers has been stranded atop a beach rock, his dog still at his side, now more nervous than attentive. The old man – surely a local – is the only one who doesn't have to hurry. He sits and watches from the stump of a beach log, throws his head back, and laughs while his work is washed into the sea.



“There can be no very black melancholy to one who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still.”

– Henry David Thoreau



FEAR AND LOATHING AT THE BEACH

Cape Perpetua and the mountains around it are great places to see the big trees – a drive down a forest road can be magical until you get into the clear-cut areas – but the real gems are the tidepools. The beaches are the most rugged on the coast, with the possible exception of those to the far south, near the end of the state. Rocks and pieces of rocks, mountains and pieces of mountains, and a sublimely uncaring sea: everything happens all the time and all at once. Perpetua endures.

An Australian bicyclist stops at every viewpoint and writes in a journal. Each time, as he and I shadow each other – I am moving down the coast in my truck, too, seeking photo opportunities – I am annoyed when I

V

notice that despite the vertiginous road route, he is never winded.

I shudder on behalf of the bicyclists I see around the cape. The chaotically winding and shoulderless road – not to mention the super-abundance of both RVs and logging trucks – cause me to calculate probabilities in my mind as I drive, the number of accidents and near-accidents, the lack of places even for alert bikers (or hikers) to hurl themselves even if they see danger coming – and I don't even own a bike. I cringe as I inch by them on the road, for their sake.

Washburne State Park has my favorite loop hike, a hike that begins in heavy forest next to a whispering stream,

includes a bent-at-the-waist crawl through a tubelike tunnel made of the hanging branches of raggedy shore pines, and finishes with a spectacular walk on the beach back to the campground, shoes off to soothe tired feet in seawater. About three hours for a lazy pace and not including time for the thousand photo opportunities encountered on the way – another sureshot.

In September 1846, the *USS Shark* was wrecked while attempting to cross the Columbia River Bar on an exploratory mission. She had once protected freed slaves on their journey to Liberia on the coast of Africa and had also been instrumental in securing various American business interests in the Mediterranean and in the West Indies. No one onboard was killed when she wrecked, and a cannon washed up on the Oregon coast in 1898 and gave the town of Cannon Beach its name.

On February 16, 2008 – shortly before I arrived here – two additional cannons washed up on a beach near Manzanita. They are undergoing the careful removal of concreted sand and sediment and will eventually be shipped back to Oregon, where presumably they will be placed on display.

The cannons and other artifacts that continue to wash up are reminders of the treachery of the sea in this particular corner of the world, and reminders to beachgoers to remain alert – the guns were unrecognizable as such to an untrained eye, weapons of war encased in crud and beached like now-extinct sturgeons: things aren't always what they appear to be.

Startling and depressing things can be learned by sifting through the trash that piggish people dump into

ditches along the sides of highways – there is never anything of beauty to be found in the remains of their consumption. It is all equally ugly, proliferate with logos and warnings, disclaimers and trademarked slogans. The things that archaeologists will learn about us are the same things neighbors can easily learn about one another when the food chain of production has been simplified for the consumer to the point that all they have to do is throw away the container when they are done stuffing themselves, a thing some still can't do without acting like a pig.

I buy an antique print at a bookstore, a shot of a church steeple on a snowy morning. I buy it because the sky behind it is austere and dramatic, and the shot is composed in a way that stands so utterly out from the others – the shot has been taken close to the side of the church from a low angle, the vertical, dark form of the steeple slicing three-quarters of the distance from the top of the frame to the bottom asymmetrically, almost as if the photographer, whoever they were, had been nearly prostrate – that I think I know now why I buy it: it reminds me of me.

I imagine that someday this is how some of my own prints may well end up, both anonymous and forgotten until found by some unknowable soul, some kindred spirit who chooses my photo from all the rest and for approximately the same reasons. It is an odd communion through time (and potentially space), but a communion among strangers is of a type I can understand.

F E A R A N D L O A T H I N G A T T H E B E A C H



MESSAGES IN A BEACH CLIFF

In places on the Oregon Coast, soft sandstone walls rise opposite the ocean to form brown and tan cliffs that contrast well with the predominant black-gray of basalt rocks and seastacks. These cliffs become unstable in the winter and into the spring, when near-constant rains wash the walls clean of crags and gouges and the patina of salt that has encrusted them, restoring the surface to a smooth, clay-like consistency that, it must be said, is irresistible.

After it dries, the smoothness and softness of the surface practically insists that it be defaced by anyone passing by with a few moments to kill and a gouging implement at hand. By mid-summer these cliffs will be as cluttered with symbols, signs, and incomprehensible messages as a railroad boxcar stalled on the edges of an urban trainyard.

Most of the things I see written are someone's initials, often paired up with a plus sign or a heart between them, or variations on the theme:

RC 'N' JH

KM LOVES JS

I♥MJ

And so on.

I see one worn patch where someone has written the enigmatic message "T.E. #43," which I take to mean that whomever carved it played tight end on a high school football team (whose name is unmentioned), jersey number forty three. Or "T.E." are initials and the number was somehow relevant to the person who carved it, or it's an inside joke meant only to be understood by those walking the beach with TE at the moment it was created, although there is no way to know any of this.





“BFF” is commonly carved here – best friends forever – usually accompanied by a list of names or initials: declarations of enduring friendship carved into crumbly cliffsides – these things make sense here for as long as they last, which isn’t long.

After initials and hearts, next most common are faces – demonic and angelic, alien, dog, and human, gape-mouthed or tight-lipped, Bart Simpson or Kilroy. The faces always melt over time, crumbling unevenly in the summer’s cycle of sweltering sun followed by crystal-cold nights, broken by dewy but quick-drying mornings. The faces dissolve naturally with time and begin

to adopt unflattering aspects that suggest massive head trauma or perma-nausea. The lower jaws are often the first to go, such that many of the sculptures appear to be vomiting.

Pentagrams and little makeshift grottoes are popular, along with personal declarations:

ZOE LOVES THE BEACH!

YOU SUCK!

GUINEA PIGS FOREVER!

And so on.

The urge to exclaim – to shout via exclamation point – is evidently compelling.

One possibly hungry beachgoer has carved the single word “HAM” without exclamation points, although it just as easily could be initials.

Sentiments about food aren’t as rare as one might think. One day on a nearby beach I watch from my perch on a sea rock, at the base of another cliff so smothered by vegetation that it is unsuitable for doodling. A tiny waterfall erupts from the wall nearby and splashes into the rocks behind me.

A family passes one way and then the other. I am busy scribbling notes of my own into a notebook and fail to see what they have left until I stumble down to water’s edge to soak my toes and take a break. From a trail of popcorn that has been left behind for the seagulls or the tides to take, it is easily deduced what the trail mix contained, at least partially, but there is more.

Perhaps as inspired by the setting as I am, one of the children has – possibly hard on the heels of a visit to Tillamook and its deservedly famous dairies – decided to pen a two-word poem about what is being eaten at the moment, an unsigned ode to fromage-ian delights:

CHEESE RULES!

On a secluded beach a few miles north of the California border – actually the beach only looks secluded

by the water-level coves and vegetation, but much of the town of Brookings hovers directly overhead, sometimes heard but far enough above the beach to be easily ignored – a tattered, half-deflated soccer ball washes up on a steep berm of sand. I note the ball tumbling in the surf, give it a half-hearted kick, a passing shot back into the sea, and walk on. When I return, I find that it has washed up again, and that someone has drawn a beleaguered-looking smiley on it and propped it atop the soft mound of sand with a fresh inscription:

“WILSON!”

It is, indeed, of that manufacture; a faded duplicate of the name is stamped by machine into a failing bit of plastic on one side, one small logo on a product that actually calls for one, and a nice little spontaneous joke, provided passersby have actually seen the movie referenced.

I of course bring my own interpretations to the things I see. Messages wear themselves out as the days pass, the tides roll in and out, and the elements transform clear messages into muddled nonsensical mysteries. They can sometimes be dated like tree rings – the most recent are the last to become fuzzied, and the oldest appear downright ancient.

I am startled one bleak day when I cross the windblown remains of what had once been a heart with someone’s name inside of it. Perhaps I’ve been exposed to too many claims about castaways, but on first glance – before I take the time to try to decipher the name, which may originally have been “MARY” before the wind began to wipe it out – I thought it looked like this:



The cliffs have so many things written into them because it is Fun to write in them. There is a tactile pleasure in gouging into the soft, smooth, sandy clay, cleaving it asunder here, adding details that will erode before the day is over there. It is as intimate a connection with the earth as many people are likely to make before the final one, when they are lowered into it to become part of it forever.

Sticks and rocks and the edges of seashells slice gracefully through the putty-like surface and become stuck on embedded pebbles. The disturbance of the salt-lacquered, tile-like medium raises fresh odors from the underlying clay – the smell of wet cement and moldy basements, the sweet emanations of overturned topsoil.

It smells fertile and seminal; it already smells like an act of creation.

The artform is more eco-friendly than marking trees because it leaves no weeping wounds. It is not permanent like tagging a wall or park bench. It is closer to art than vandalism or even graffiti, because its ultimate fate is always understood to be quick destruction. None of these will ever be displayed in an art museum, even the most beautiful, which some might argue makes for an even better case for calling it art.

It is here while it is here and then it is gone, leaving no trace unless someone takes a photo, but what would be the point of that?

Here is a problem: at what point does my photograph of an artwork supersede the work itself? Which is art and which is more artistic? Do I even have the right to make a permanent version of someone's chimerical masterpiece, even if a week from now it will appear to be nothing but a melted alien face, amateurishly rendered and puking into the sand like a frat boy?

I don't know.

But I don't care. It is Fun to poke and prod the earth, and it is Fun to photograph vomituous monster faces. So Fun, in fact, that it makes me wonder who else has been here and done similar things. It is a simple pleasure, a Natural one and a whimsical one; I have to wonder: did Indians carve messages in the beach?

There is no real way to know this either because of the nature of the subject. The Indians are practically as gone here – as missing – as anything they may have been trying to say to one another in this spot, but I can speculate.

Many of the petroglyphs found on boulders and cave walls around the world have similar basic design elements in common – such as ladder structures, stick figures, repeatedly-bisected circles and spirals, upright triangles, and so on – that can also be found quite often in children's crayon drawings and in workplace notepad doodles, although I'm not aware of any studies. There may be something uniquely satisfying in drawing these shapes, something deep in the collective psyche of mankind. They are here too.

The map of known petroglyphs in this country is cen-

tered on the arid plains and deserts of the inland West, but this doesn't mean that these were the only tribes to make them, only that they did so in a more preservative environment. They would have inscribed onto whatever surface was at hand, regardless of the long-term decay or – in accord with much else that is known about the Indians' understanding of natural cycles – in acceptance of them, even in celebration. Should we expect squeamishness over the delicacy of beach art from a culture whose ideal hero is one who gives away all he owns?

People especially like to carve the names of other places, either places they are from or perhaps places they would like passersby to briefly consider, and a few places and even eras that seem utterly random. I see "HAWAII," "CHILICOTHE," and "MEXICO" but one such scrawl takes grand prize; bizarrely incongruous is a single word completely out of time and place:

PHONECIA

Even William Clark felt compelled to carve his name and that of his Home upon having reached the ending of his journey – or the midpoint, more precisely – and even though there may have been a relevant military reason to do so – in case the Corps of Discovery failed to make it Home the inscription that he chiseled into a tree would at least inform other whites of their last known location – it must have also had a touch of pride in it, a bit of gloating, a declaration of victory:

WILLIAM CLARK DECEMBER 3RD 1805.
BY LAND FROM U. STATES IN 1804 & 1805 –

The religious pen messages to God in the most beautiful spots, short slogans like "JESUS SAVES." Atheists use the same places – the most beautiful and inspiring – to pen screeds against God and in favor of Science as his replacement. Some of these are quite lengthy. No one leaves messages in ugly spots, probably because few go there. Both sorts of messages are ultimately wiped out like all the rest, mortal and stricken.

It is the same thing that makes people throw coins into fountains or, for that matter, build sand castles. In a sense this is humanity laid bare, using primitive symbols and language, real caveman stuff.

In an atmosphere buzzing with text messages, people still feel the need to carve their names into real things. It is not just the permanence of a physical surface versus the rubbery inconsequence of a digital one, because there is no permanence to be found here, either. Any messages left here will barely outlive a shout.

Photos are meant to snare a moment from the unending current of time, to try to preserve an ephemera on paper or, ironically, in digits on a computer screen, to be lost with the push of a button just as it was originally found and saved.



THE PARANOIA OF WINTER

The Earth in its orbit twists away from the sun this time each year as if recoiling from the scorching of summer, singed and forever again timid. To those on the other side the sun has shot high into the sky, new life springs up again, and it is time for Fun; for those of us cast suddenly into darkness as if we have done something wrong, it is off to the gulag of Arctic breezes that become demonic whirlwinds, fear and loathing in the barren wastes. It is as if on the side pointed away from the

sun each winter dark forces are allowed free play during the nighttime hours, the hours of darkness when lunacy – that is, the influence of a bad moon – is given its time.

In the long night of a winter storm it is possible to pretend we are lost and forgotten by the rest of the world, that we've broken free of the continental shelf and gone drifting, rudderless, into the deep black waters of the North Pacific, the USS Oregon Coast signing off as she floats off the Edge of the world. This ship is going down tonight, I know it.

This is how it feels to ride out a winter storm on the Oregon Coast in a trailer, misplaced by space and time, suspended in an alternate reality in which the only con-

stants are the howling wind, the pounding surf, and the sinking suspicion that the sun will somehow simply fail to come up in the morning, but it won't matter because the morning itself won't come at all.

It is the twisted logic of the paranoid shut-in: not only can whatever is lurking out there in the darkness sneak up on me more easily, but whatever they do to me will be done in muffled blackness, anonymously – no justice, no revenge. Whoever does whatever to me they will get away with it, if I don't get them first.

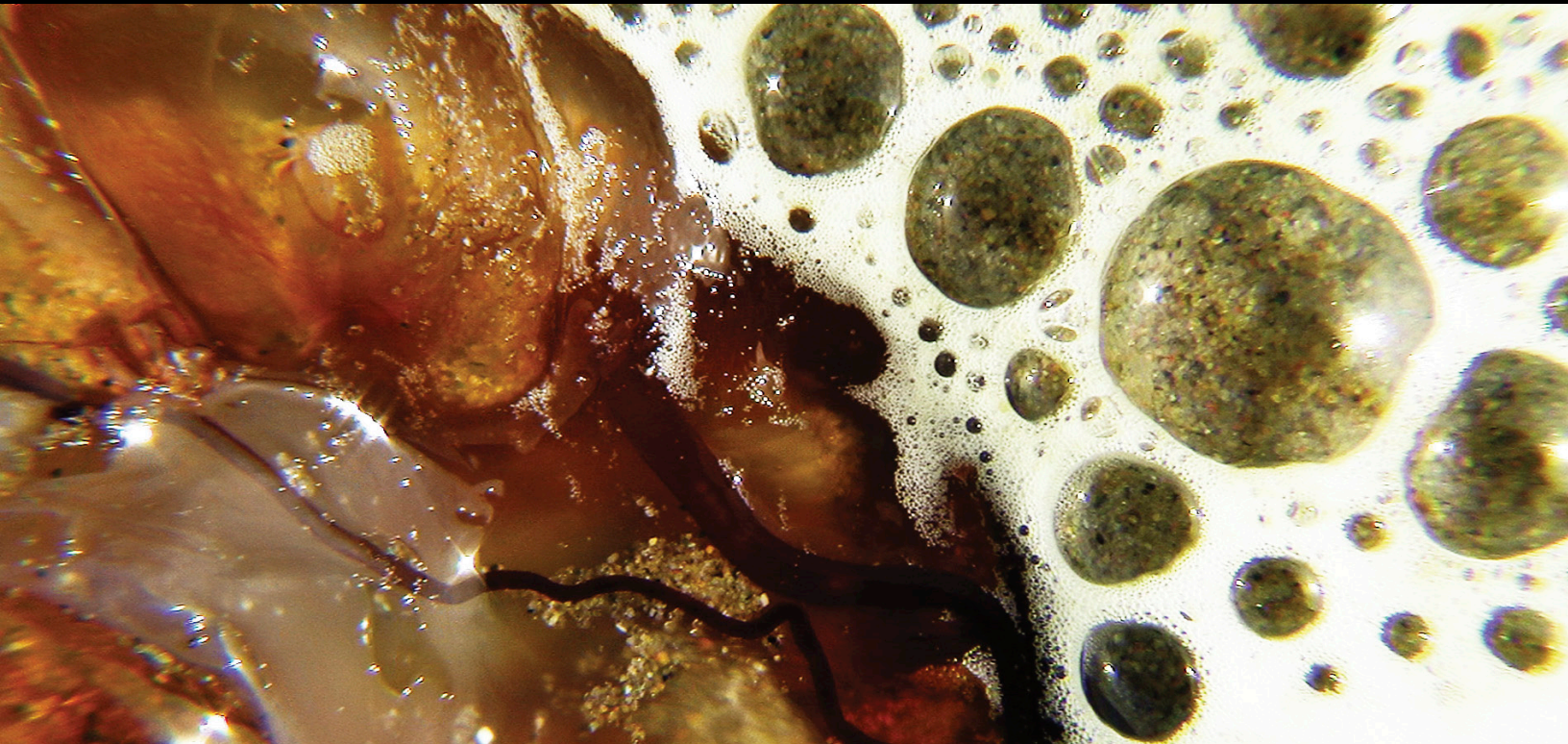
The tilt of the planet puts the sun at about seventy degrees above the horizon in summer. In the deepest depths of winter it is closer to twenty. The hours of life-giving daylight are cut in half, from sixteen to eight, and the type of light we do receive is often scarcely worthy of the word. The gloomy colors only seem to shorten the days even more: leaden clouds blot out the Coast Range, blue-green fog and mists enshroud the

ocean villages, already dark forests become midnight black. Some mid-afternoon hikes require flashlights.

Winter is when local businesses go under when the most recent tourist season has failed to keep them afloat. Leases end and cannot be renewed. Suicide rates spike.

In winter, backyards become places to avoid. Trees shed appendages with abandon, shorn by gales. Moles create crumbling piles of fresh mud from nothingness. Soggy things become soggy and begin to rot. These same places in summer are settings for family photo albums, motifs that span generations. This dualistic nature of Pacific Northwest backyards results in duelist scenarios – summer's shade fades quickly into winter's gloom, the palaces of personal solitude become those of personal shame.

I enjoy it all from afar; my backyard changes constantly and travels with me.





There is an urgency in a winter day to get things done. Summer days are lazy ones, hours whiled away under trees with frivolous books, time burned up with abandon, like campfire logs – there is time to dillydally, to speculate on and on and on, to stand in one place a while – an hour, a week – for no good reason. Winter is “Right Now.” The sun will sink and the day will end. There is little time in which to make an effort if an effort is to be made.

Spring cleanup can be interesting, as coils of smoke spiral alongside roads and invade neighborhoods with the sweet stench of burning leaves and fallen branches. In the countryside, some burn their personal trash year-

round in a corner of their property because they don’t want neighbors to see the contents of their rubbish bins (or just as likely don’t want to pay the sanitation department to haul it away).

Through the windows of passing vehicles the stink passes like a ghost – a whiff of burning flesh (the smoldering remains of last night’s roast turkey), rotting and half-eaten fruits and vegetables (potato peels, orange rinds, and carrot tops), clam and oyster shell halves (and fish bones and crab claws), and charred plastic and wire insulation (impossible to tell). Neighbors erect signs along the edge of the highway:

PLEASE STOP BURNING TRASH!

perament.

I set out on a hike to the beach, a lunchtime hike that becomes an evening hike and then a night hike before I know it in these vaporously short winter days, the beach becoming otherworldly in these gray-black hours. There is no relief or texture, no shadows cast. Light simply disappears into the surfaces on which it is thrown. Distances are weird and hard to gauge. All is two-dimensional.

Places I have seen bathed in sunset and speckled with girls in bikinis and kite-flying gaggles of children are unrecognizable as the same in winter, the familiar interplay of shapes and colors instead an amorphous swirl of the same shade of gray. But there is beauty regardless, like a black and white photo, as if the beauty here were naturally resilient: as if the girls have shed bikinis for flowing evening gowns and grown into graceful and maudlin maidens.

In every other sense the beach is more like a woman scorned. There is no going near the ocean in a thirty-foot storm surge, without a surfboard and wetsuit at least. The highest of high tides gnaw at beach dunes like a wild dog on a steak bone. Even otherwise dry places can't be stood upon for long: by stinging rain and burning sand I am ripped from the face of a beach rock, knocked down by gusts that undercut my legs like a flying tackle.

Sadly for those of us addicted to such pursuits, severe thunderstorms and tornadoes are exceedingly rare on most parts of the coast in all seasons. Happily though, the beach-based pastime practiced here – involving both meteorological and hydrological components – is absurdly easy given the right waterproof gear and tem-

THE PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY OF THE COAST RANGE

My junior high school was built with a modular design, with walls that could be moved and rearranged according to the fluctuating demographics of the student body, or assembled once per year to create one big room for standardized testing or anytime it was nice to have an entire class in one classroom. Pointless, really. The rooms always ended up the same size most of the time, and the gymnasium or cafeteria worked just as well for large groups. I think the builders fell in love with the idea that they could rearrange the school interior however they liked whenever they wanted. The appeal was always fundamentally about the power to control their environment at will.

There must also have been something Fun in the act of moving all of those walls around on overhead tracks, rotating and adding and removing them. It would have been a blast to create an indoor maze out of an entire floor of the building, perhaps for a marathon game of laser-tag. This is what I was fantasizing about while my teachers were trying to teach, at any rate. I suspect the janitors – to whom the task must have fallen – may have invented reasons to move those walls.

The geography of the West Coast pushes one's gaze only further westward. Houses and businesses tend to favor windows, balconies, and patios that face west as well as south. The Coast Mountains rise like a wall of wilderness to the east; a vast expanse – the rest of the world – lies immediately to the west. The whole experience leans that way.

The impression grows stronger as one moves southward down the coast, toward California. The mountains are bigger and generally closer to the beach. Dramatic cliffs and seastacks front the ocean. The topography to the east is in many ways similar to many other oceanless Western places but the topography to the west is

nonexistent and thus unchanging: the day always ends in the sea and the sun always ends up wet, doused by the Great Pacific.

In most places it is spectacularly easy to walk north or south, on the relatively flat land of the North Coast especially (until reaching a river or headland, obviously). Walking west is out of the question. To the east is all that is attached to us by geography, nationalism, and culture – virtually all of which could in theory be walked to from here, and certainly can be driven to – and yet it is psychologically no less a barrier. It is akin to being backed between two walls, although I prefer to suppose that they are walls to hug like the interior



walls of hallways, to adhere to them by surface tension to keep from tumbling off into the marine depths.

The base topography of much of the Oregon Coast is in many ways reminiscent of that of Haiti. The ocean is more-or-less on the same side, there are coastal plains over which mountains loom mist-covered on most days and to about the same height, but Oregon has trees. Blue sky pokes through them on the western horizon and the eastern sweep is blotted by dense forests beyond which are only denser ones. Mountains sometimes loom like monsters. The effect is not unlike that of Yellowstone, too – the sky magnified and glorified, the earth steamy and alive.

Here is the architecture of Nature, exterior design on a grand scale. A person can wander and allow the whims of geography and topography to determine the route. In and out of pockets of local architecture I can while away an afternoon in a fairly small parcel of beach, following the spectacles that draw the eye. The whole place changes with just a few steps on hands and knees and each high tide rearranges everything: the repartitioning power of Nature.

DEVELOPMENT OF A CAMPSITE

Weekend Freaks only come out on Fridays and always leave on Sundays (excepting three-day holiday weekends). They camp often enough to have rituals and

favorite sites, but not enough to really know what they are doing or often even why. They can only get away on weekends – it's not their fault.

The décor – regardless of the length of the stay – is often rife with patriotic sentiment. They raise flagstaffs topped with American flags and sit in lawn chairs, dry themselves with towels, sleep in tents and sleeping bags all of which are bedecked in stars and stripes. Canadians fight back with equally garish displays while others adorn their trailers with both American and Canadian flags in an attempt to bring peace to the situation, true international moderates.

They put out chairs, a large mat or a rug to keep them from tracking dirt & pine needles into their trailers, some Christmas lights or lanterns – basic stuff. Other campers, those preparing for a prolonged stay, are more elaborate . . .

Some seek extreme privacy. One chilly day I am walking a remote loop of a campground to stretch my legs and get some air. There is only one other camper in this particular loop, but he is serious.

He has developed his campsite in a military sense of the word, as if preparing to repulse an imminent assault. Plastic storage containers line the peripheries of the site to provide a crude wall, augmented by tarpaulins hung from cords stretched between trees and draped with soggy clothing swooning in the mild breeze. Two guard dogs prowl the grounds. A meager column of smoke rises from an obstructed firepit.

He pokes his head out from the fortifications, startled, as I walk by. He is wearing a toque and a scarf against

the autumn chill, looking a bit like Waldo, the distinct figure from the *Where's Waldo?* series of books, or perhaps like Michael Palin's bicycling enthusiast from Monty Python.

He smiles and waves when it is clear I'm not the enemy he's been waiting for, that I'm not there to reduce his defenses. Then he ducks back down below a parapet formed by his minivan and disappears into one of his three tents, his private bunker.

My trailer has both a washing machine and a dryer. Although the former has been broken for about two years; the dryer rumbles and squeals like a sick ox, but it still works, and is extremely useful in such a soggy climate.

Staying clean while camping will always be an issue, an eternal struggle for mankind. I have learned to appreciate hot showers in a way previously unimagined. Piping-hot water trickles from my five-gallon water heater like love, a steaming faucet spewing comfort-soup for the body (and mind) in the midst of perpetual drizzles.

Locals sometimes use the cleaning power of the ocean itself. On a beach in Washington I discover an old couch that has been tethered to a post driven into the beach to keep it from floating away – the erstwhile owner has left it here for a few days (or a few weeks, or has abandoned it altogether) to allow the constant washing to cleanse it. I imagine untold quantities of cat pee washing away in the surf, and imagine it still reeks of it.

There is an indominable stink in some campgrounds to

go with the more pervasive sweetness of burning cedar, barbeque, and citronella – the broken, emptied, and discarded shells of clams, crabs, and oysters that grow odoriferous in the long, direct summer heat.

One week in the depths of summer I stop at a county park on a whim. The only available site is downwind of a dumpster that in theory is emptied twice per week. By the weekend I have closed my windows to keep out the stench that has been born in its cozy depths: every time someone opens the lid to toss in their garbage, a fresh cloud of putrescence descends on me.

Seafood, far from the most appealing odor when fresh at least to my nostrils, becomes nightmarish under such conditions to the point that I find myself envious of the Indians' shell middens, which surely also resulted in otherworldly stinks too, but at least these were ventilated and moderated by the rapid decomposition of Nature.

SHOOTING THE FAMILY DOG

I sit atop a beach log that has been pushed above the vegetation line by a faraway and unknown storm. The log has been here every time I have, so it must have been deposited by a storm surge of a winter long past; given the quality of the wood and state of deterioration, I would guess it has been at least ten years but not more than twenty. It is set in a depression overgrown on three sides, obstructing my peripheral view of the sea.



Into the slice of beach I can see wanders an old man, stepping carefully backwards in a crouch over rocks and clumps of seaweed, camera with a long lens held to his eye. After several moments I lean forward to see his target through the brush: a boy of about ten or twelve trailing behind him, disinterested. An old yellow dog saunters beside him, tail wagging sluggish and listlessly behind it.

Together the couple give off an odor of utter boredom: the dog is in the process of breaking down into senility

– an anti-puppy – and the boy is wallowing in impending puberty, just at that age at which nature walks with the family begin to lose their appeal.

A grandfather is surreptitiously lining up a shot of his laggard grandson as he meanders, oblivious and kicking rocks. He kneels to get a low angle for his shot. He has trouble both reaching the ground and assuming a stable position on the unreliable loose rocks, and I smile.

I try to imagine the final shot on this fogbound eve-

ning: boy and dog up front and in perfect focus with the largest aperture possible, a wild, fuzzy sea to the right, the dramatic cliffs and far-off cape to the left – if not rendered in detail and relief then at least suggested subconsciously by the blue gloom cast through the heavy cloud – jumbles of rocks in the right places and drift logs making lines that add a geometrical sensibility to the composition.

Beyond them four others wander into the frame of what would be my shot were I were to take one, which I'm not. The others are busily snapping one another and laughing – shots of everything they see, logs and rocks, the sky, the great wide-open, ramshackle chaos of the ocean. What we have here is a family of photographers – or at least all but the dog and the youngest member, perhaps.

Initially I think I've witnessed an iconic family moment – the day Grandpa got that great shot of Billy – but now I have to wonder what life is like as the youngest member of a family of photographers. How many great shots has Billy already posed for today? Maybe wily old Grandpa has been shooting his grandson all day, from every possible angle and in every light with every lens, all vacation long. Maybe Billy isn't unwitting and bored, but annoyed and bored.

Did Grandpa's great shot reflect *that*? Like so much else that happens around me on this long Road – like stray asteroids in erratic orbit around a vagabond sun – I'll never know.

This appears to be a moment within a family history – a commonly shared event – and the photo itself hard documentation to support memories of Fun. I've just

witnessed the event – the taking of a photo – but the context is as much a mystery to me as it will be when the photo is developed and printed or framed and hung on a wall or held tightly to a breast, if any of that will ever happen. It is a theoretical mystery inherent not only in every photograph, but also in every photographer, subject, and setting, a mystery inherent in the act of photography itself.

It is a flexible mystery that changes over time due not to the accumulation of clues – I will never find any, and those in a position to look for such things rarely do – but because the context changes around the photo, the way roots grow around a boulder.

Photos can be used to remember cherished loved ones or places a family holds dear, or they can be used as blackmail, as disputed items in a divorce, as reminders of moments that Now – in the future – may take on dark or bittersweet tones. The nature of the photograph itself changes over time because the people change.

Not to put too fine a point on it, some day the grandfather will be gone, the boy grown, and the family still wandering the misty beaches, cameras in hand – or not. What will the photo I've just witnessed mean to them then? Will it be a prized family heirloom or a forgotten file on a hard drive waiting to be melted back into its constituent recyclable parts, gone and never existed in the first place? Will it simply be usurped by a better photo or lost in the flood of images this snap-happy family must accumulate in a single day, let alone a lifetime?

As a newborn photograph it could turn out to be any of these things or something else altogether.

Newborn photos of newborn humans are about the most malleable things I can imagine. A baby photo is cute when the baby is still a baby, embarrassing at puberty, funny in middle-age, tragic or sublime (or both) at old age – and something else entirely after the photo's subject has passed on.

Projected even further through time a photo has the potential to be not only a useful document in a family history but in a national one, or it could even be a vital contribution to the greater story of the history of mankind itself: documents on extreme trajectories. Or it can be lost and forgotten, left in a box somewhere, destroyed by water and indifference.

None of this can ever be known when the button is

pressed.

The act of photography belies a natural transparency of motive. My father was into photography as a hobby before I was born. He dabbled in color but his true love was always as simple as black and white, as still can be seen in the photos.

I once discovered his old equipment in a pile in a hidden corner of our basement: tripods and lenses, filters that roll across floors and are fun to look through and throw, stacks of developing pans and bottles of solution, negative projectors and enlarging apparatus. Somewhere in there must also have been the camera itself, its frame made of the hard, sturdy plastic of the '60s,





anchored atop a rickety tripod of real metal.

What I remember most vividly is the dust that had accumulated during its years in the basement as it sat untouched – but then everything left in basements ends up either dusty or moldy, as a rule of the universe.

When I asked about the equipment, my father's latent interest in photography – on low flicker for years – reignited itself in a last spasm of image-taking, an Indian summer in kodachrome. I lost track of the equipment

after he and my mother divorced and he moved out, taking it all with him. He must have sold it.

But for a few weeks in the Groovy Seventies he was back into it with passion. For me it was an adventure, something New and unexpected under the sun. This is the period from which many of my contributions to the family album (or albums, after the divorce) were made, as a subject only, being too young to work such a complicated machine as his camera.

I have sense memories of that brief period, at least: the very unnatural stench of developing fluid that wrecks the sense of smell if one gets too close, like burning sulfur – as a doctor's son and being not unfamiliar with the sterile non-odor of science, it smelled to me like embalming fluid – the magical bidding of time as the paper swims in first one chromium pan and then another, the image coming to life out of nothingness over the course of a few minutes, and most of all the blood-red glow of the darkroom lamp, a clinical illumination in a shade of red that seems to project no shadows, permeating the room and soaking it, bathing real life in true color like the pages of film stock dripping moisture from the clothesline hung for the purpose.

I play about at my father's feet with action figures and army men, my imaginary battleground ablaze with the murderous rage of slaughter, the deep red glow of the tinted sodium lamp transformed like magic into the awful aura of Mars, god of war.

I play with zeroes and ones Now. Still I wonder at what might been lost even if I myself have not felt it – I know there was once a tactile pleasure in film photography that is no longer there and for me, aside from a few weeks in the late Seventies, was never there at all, as if something were missing.

“It continued to rain and blow so violently that there was no movement of the party today.”

– William Clark

“Nothing extraordinary happened today.”

– Meriwether Lewis



WHEN IN A CROWD . . .

I am looking under a bridge, a thing I always do. Not only are the bridges themselves often visually interesting, but often too are the things they span – rivers and creeks and gullies and railroad rights-of-way. One of the reasons I always look undoubtedly stems from a memory of the scorching heat of Arizona, and the way that the bridges that span dry washes are often fifteen or twenty degrees cooler than road surfaces built on the ground itself. Driving over one in a car without air conditioning is a half-second of relative bliss before

voice asks.

one is once again smacked in the face with hot air – it is not hard for me to figure out how my habit of seeking out the nooks of bridges got started.

I am mesmerized by a leaf in a stream when I hear a voice behind me that echoes in the cavernous space made dark by the direct sun falling on either side of it, resulting in glare – and more relativism.

“Did you find the turtle?” the



I turn – not easy, as I straddle a midstream gap between two slippery rocks – to see a scruffy but unhardened man in dingy overalls and a slimy baseball cap, skin ripe with tattoos. He has been watching me from a perch a few feet under the surface of 101, which roars directly overhead.

I must look puzzled, so he explains: “I’m waiting for my turtle to come back.”

I explain what I’m doing, too – trying to get stable and line up a shot. Unprompted, the stranger offers his name – his name is Arlen – and his situation: “I’m what you would call a drifter,” Arlen says to me.

I’ve never cared for the word “homeless.” It implies that a house is always a Home, and makes the lack of a house sound like a greater absolute than it really is, evokes for houses more reverence than mere buildings deserve.

W H E N I N A C R O W D . . .

Arlen the Drifter and I begin to chat. His interest in turtles is informed and sincere. As he talks, he twists and grimaces in a stiff and familiar way – he’s doing the back spasm two-step.

“Issues with your back?” I ask.

“It’s no fun getting old,” he says, and I grunt.

I share my own pain with him and it emerges that along with our common infirmity neither of us has health insurance. Mine expired the day I moved out of my house in Tucson but couldn’t have been renewed anyway, as it was strictly for residents of the state of Arizona. I have been living dangerously ever since.

I don’t need to pay premiums but I have no safety net if I fall. Or, I *am* paying premiums, on pain. As things stand, I will only get sicker – chronic pain turning to serious nerve and joint damage – and fall apart like an overripe blackberry. Whether this happens depends on whether I make money. That is, my pain is inversely proportional to my ability to make money, and interest is compounded daily (especially in the morning).

Arlen doesn’t ask me for anything.* I tell him I’ll keep an eye open for a way to deal with back spasms, but I don’t tell him I’ll put it in a book if I find one.

Arlen eventually wanders back to his stuff – not really a

bundle, more like a collection of plastic shopping bags, a pillow, and a good pair of military-issue hiking boots, a few other miscellaneous military-issue things (I don’t see a gun) – and I go back to my camera, eventually to roll home to my trailer and cats and warm food and bed.

The incident will stick in my mind, though, and the lesson is a useful one: always look under bridges.

At a distance they appear to be the wakes of boats rippling on the surface of the river, appearing and vanishing and shifting unusually quickly, as such illusions are apt to do. They slowly resolve themselves as packs of birds, clusters and lines of dozens of sanderlings and sandpipers, pelicans in twos and threes, murres and cormorants – all flowing downstream as a rising tide makes the river flow against itself.

The marine fish unlucky enough to be caught at the mouth of the river are being locked inside it until the tide stabilizes and they can escape, if they survive the coming frenzy. Birds circle crazily and plop into the water, plunging into the surface after vertical dives, graceful sweeping turns to retrace their route for fish they may have missed. It is every bird for itself, Pearl Harbor reenacted for ten minutes like a *Monty Python* sketch before they clear away, stuffed.

Strange creatures eat the scotch broom that doesn’t belong here, natives who have discovered their favorite foreign food. After a rainshower in the right season – slug season – they come out by the hundreds, ooze up into the bushes, and mass together in bunches a few feet off the ground. Some simply dangle when they’ve reached the end of a branch, because they can’t ooze

* Footnote: I learned something about panhandlers shortly after I moved to Tucson – the city has since passed laws meant to keep these people out – and a man who claimed he was hungry took my ten bucks shamelessly into a liquor store (without a word of thanks), and since then I have turned down most such requests. It was his money after I handed it to him, but given his appearance (and odor) I would have preferred he buy a Big Mac and a shower.



backwards. If there is no way to get leverage – no other branches within reach – they simply dangle by their sticky rear ends, seeming to be staring at the ground and contemplating the fall that they will eventually have to take. Time, after all, waits for no slug.

It will drop the two or three feet at some point because it has no choice, but I think it is too near-sighted to see the problem. It merely sits at the edge of the branch and stares at the abyss, looking at nothing and thinking nothing, the most Zen moment imaginable. I give it a nudge. It is a soft but nevertheless rude landing. When it again disgorges its head from inside itself, it ever so slowly gloops away, perhaps to climb another bush – or maybe the same one.

Some things can't be eased into. Sometimes you just have to jump (or be pushed).

S ANDPIPERS I

They don't always register immediately when they are present. They slither through peripheral vision a few times, feathery phantasms, before their constant motion – the way they zip by in tight packs that morph and shift like a flying amoeba and scamper before the foamy fringe of an incoming wave as it rolls itself out, uncannily retreating from the Edge like leaves from a leafblower – registers on the active mind and I realize I have been gazing, thoroughly anesthetized, for an hour.

Their faded undersides all show themselves at once, a quick flicker of tan before the sun reflects from their



wings at the same instant at precise angles, creating a burst of silver. There is some sort of collective effort going on that is indistinguishable from telepathy from the ground. They are communicating somehow, and at quantum speeds.

There is detail and order within the chaos, or at least I am tricked into thinking so. They drain around and over seastacks like water. Rivulets of a string of three or four or five in a row who run in the same courses become streams of identifiable individuals following one another if one looks carefully and quickly enough, or discovers oneself mesmerized and hypnotized by the movement – just like water.

If the bands of juvenile sandpipers are like the Preteen Gangstas I met at Cape Dis, then the genetically selected beaches and estuaries in which shorebirds stop for a few days on their long migrations are the busiest corners of the suburbs, the corner with the four-way stoplight and the three convenience stores, the place to see and be seen.

I wonder at the pace of city life as a thing I've long since left behind, and don't particularly miss. There are too many people, too much scurrying and just-restrained panic, too much paranoia, destitution, and fear. But then, some are city slickers and some aren't. I am not. There is something also in the way rainshowers often get repelled by downtowns in the summer by the radiant heat of the pavement, like the rain simply doesn't want to fall there. It seems unnatural because it is.

The sandpipers can handle this pace, the pace to which they have evolved.

Not only has their movement hypnotized me as they

flit acrobatically by in massed shapes – composited flying amoeba-whales – but their very lifestyle has left me gazing in awe. They cooperate and thrive like the organs of a single creature but they are not a single thing. They are mere individuals acting in harmony.

But then, sandpiper life looks pretty easy. It really only requires eating and staying within the pack. They poke into the sand with slender sharp beaks, slicing into the fizzy mix where a wave spends its last gallon of effort, surgically extracting invertebrates like sand fleas and bloodworms with woodpecker-like rapidity. They look like semi-sentient robots armed with sewing-machine needles.

Each spring the Arctic becomes its opposite, transforming from permanent icebound night into permanent life-drenched day, the sun seldom dropping below the horizon to halt the work of chlorophyll, nocturnal animals kept up all day eating one another, and themselves food for others: a biological free-for-all.

And it is free, or virtually so; the problem is in getting there.

The situation draws predatory animals to feast on the banquet, but the tiny shorebirds are the only ones equipped with the means of getting to the table quickly enough to eat their fill during the short Arctic feasting season – at least above the surface of the water – so once they get there the meal will be gratis.*

* Footnote: Unless they are eaten by other birds, that is. Hawks, eagles, owls, and other birds of prey inevitably pick a few off here and there, and foxes and wolves often amputate limbs or perform decapitations in sneak-attacks. The pack is always going to lose a few.

But it is now September and the migration is to the south, and is more casual if also more haphazard. The adult sandpipers who bred in Alaska during the summer are now trickling in small groups back to the Mexican Coast – some will continue on to Chile and elsewhere in the southern hemisphere – along with a few young adults of their own species and similar small batches of others. But most of the juveniles have been left behind in the Arctic, thrown into the world alone to make their own way south if and when they are up to it and with only the instincts encoded in their DNA to guide them.

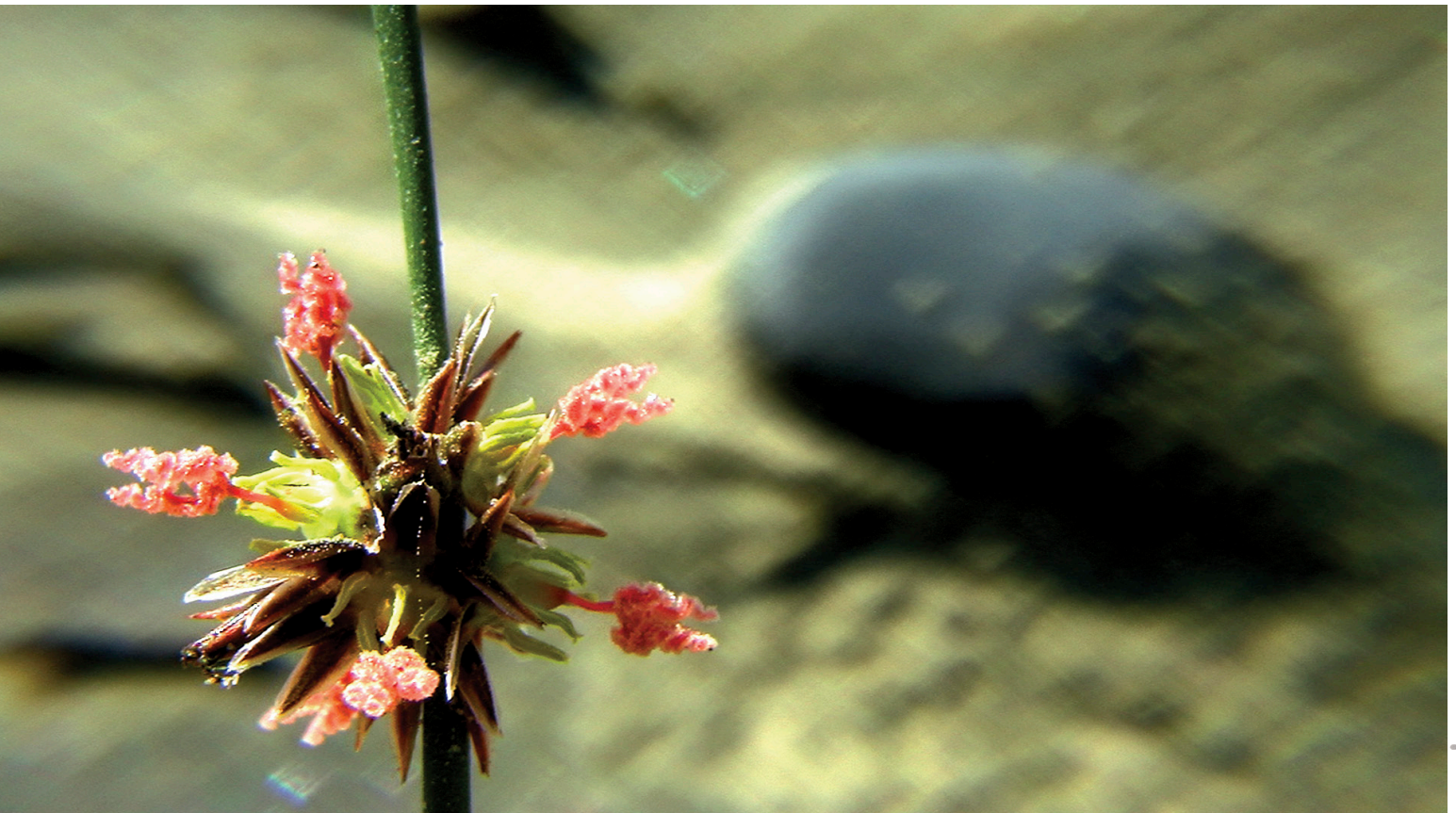
Many of the young shorebirds will repeatedly get lost, missing the intended resting spots over and over, to wander alone until discovering others in similar straits and banding with them, eventually to bumble back to the security of a large flock only to become lost and

scattered again.

They always have to find their own way Home, in the End.

THE PERSISTENCE OF FOOTPRINTS

Footprints on a beach are like a human version of the slime that slugs leave behind them upon oozing across asphalt: they can't be helped. Unlike those of slugs, human trails suggest creatures of extreme mobility. I can find footprints made by the same shoe or foot five



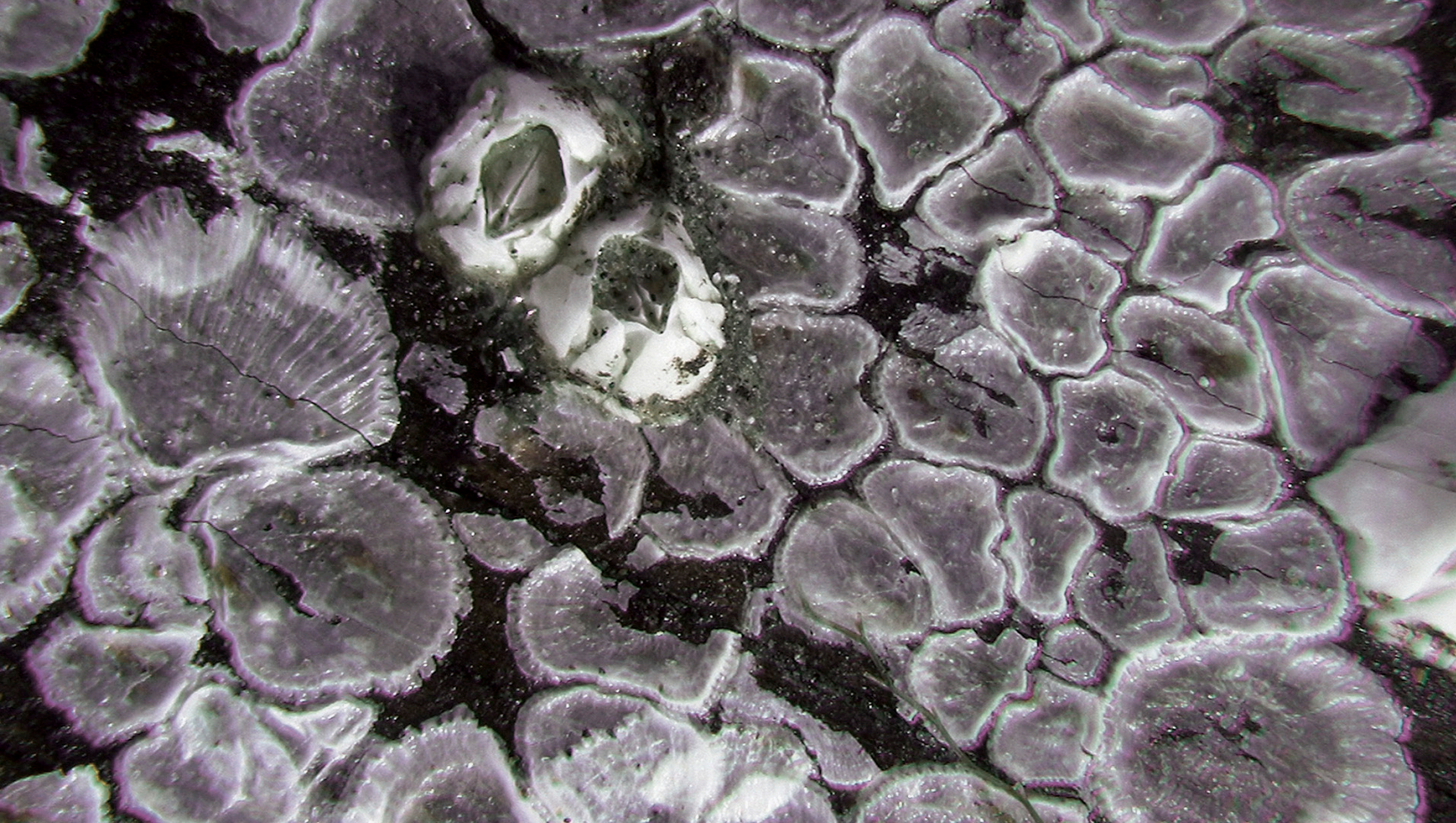


miles apart in the heart of summer, when the other professional beach bums arrive. I can figure out where someone stopped and stared, and maybe even what they were staring at.

On busy beaches it is possible to recognize the recurring footprints of barefooted children and adults or those with unusual patterns on their shoes, people in wheelchairs or using crutches or riding bikes with tires of various treads, gulls and crows with limps, pawprints in bunches of four left behind by running dogs, or the

crooked, twin dashed gougelines of horses. These are moments captured not on the two-dimensional photographic plane but in physical space: true art, like a trail of bread crumbs.

After a beach dries following a brief shower, there is often a thin crust that develops on the surface sand with loose sand, now also dried, below it. The phenomenon is similar to what happens when a snow drift partially melts and then refreezes – the nature of the underlying material that holds the structure up has itself changed,



becoming less dense and thus less tightly packed, rendering it unstable. If someone walks across such sand, foot-sized pocks are created. If this is then followed by another cycle of blowing and drifting sand, the holes are filled in with fluffy sand that is lighter in color than the still-cemented sand around it, making the whole thing look a bit sad.

I like to watch the footprints over several days if I can, to see how long they last, how temporary are their temporary lives, which will endure in the memory of the beach the longest.

Indians of the coast played a game very much like field hockey, using sticks to batter a puck back and forth over a meadow, scoring points by swatting it between two goal posts. Competitions would often go on for days between two rival bands. We can imagine the intensity involved from the fact that the opposing teams had all of their worldly possessions at stake (and given the Indians' penchant for both the institutions of gambling and slavery, we can imagine at times that some had their freedom on the line, as well).

Potlatches were grand festivals wherein the host showered his guests with gifts, lavished every luxury on them in the form of food and beautiful artworks and

practical party favors like canoes.* An especially overwrought king might kill a valuable slave with a special club and fling the slave's scalp at a rival around the feasting table, literally throwing his opulence in the face of a foe who, humiliated, might sail off into the ocean and float off the Edge of the world, a suicide.

The original impetus for such competitive munificence may have been the relative wealth of food resources available to the Indians of the coast. Famines are probably unknown to these lands, and a three-foot hole dug in most locations would reveal as much drinking water as a family needs. The Natural wealth may have festered in the collective subconscious to the point that stinginess and greed became doubly repulsive to coastal archaic society as a whole. Therefore, perhaps, its opposite was elevated to the greatest virtue. We can imagine a scenario that spiraled out of control, beginning with extravagant feasts and accelerating to the big-ticket items, like slaves' scalps or strands of dentalia.**

The quest for money was iconified for the Indians by the pileated woodpecker. The bright red topknot on the

* Footnote: These were hand-crafted using a small tool called an adze from a single tree already hollowed out by fire, and scraped until the surface was smooth. Lewis and Clark also made canoes in this manner, but described the Indians' sixty-foot vessels as "butifull;" they freely confess their admiration for them in their journals.

** Footnote: So named because they look like the incisors of tigers or like elephant tusks, but actually come from mollusks. Dentalia are small, tube-like shells that were once harvested off the coast of Vancouver Island to the north by the Nuu-chah-nulth Indians and then traded as far south as Southern California, although occasionally a shell or group of shells concreted in sand will migrate slowly down the coast with the tides. Ironically, they are much easier to find on the beaches now than two hundred years ago, as few beachcombers know what they are or that they are – or at least were – valuable.

birds' heads were among the most lavish status symbols a person could own. Eager young men roamed the forest for months seeking the "twap-twap-twap" of the woodpecker digging a meal from under the bark of a tree. A pileated woodpecker, a thing ordinarily of little value to anyone but a fellow woodpecker, meant fame, fortune, and marriage to the coast Indians.

The ease with which they won and lost all – sometimes literally on a roll of the dice – speaks volumes about the philosophical worldview of the coast tribes. In studying them, time and again we encounter a willingness to risk all, and a fervid, almost heartsick lust for wealth. Their oral histories are replete with stories of the whims of personal fortune, the lesson always seeming to be that there are always many ups and downs in life, that's the way it is. I think the Indians understood the passage of time more accurately than I ever have.

As today, the acquisition of wealth was the goal always but to then give it away was the point of it all: the very Meaning of Life.

Many automatically acquaint Indians of the Northwest with totem poles, but these are more properly associated with Indians further to the north, among the aboriginal First Nations of Canada and Alaska. Totem poles depict stories. Following the stacked faces and figures from the top to the bottom of the pole tells a story in the form of a series of situations. In a very surreal way, totem poles are figurative literature.

In Oregon, the Salish Indians instead fashioned "welcoming figures." These were hewn from individual logs and placed outside the entrances to longhouses. They often depicted mythological gods and heroes, and

were rendered with arms outstretched as if standing ready to help visitors haul up their canoes for a potlatch, like divine valets.

A modern version of the potlatch sometimes occurs here. In 2004 a bottle washed up on the North Coast stuffed with diamonds and corked with a note inside, a gift to whomever may find it.

Something should be said about Chinook Jargon.

It was a trade language developed by and used between the Chinook tribes and the whites with whom they traded. It was a simplified and somewhat corrupted “trade language” patched together from odd bits and pieces of various Salish and Chinook Indian tongues as well as languages from further afield, and peppered with English, Spanish, French, and Russian. Its mongrelloid composition reminds me of the speech of mockingbirds, or indeed of English itself.





Clark noted it: "The persons who usually visit the entrance of this river for the purpose of traffic or hunting I believe are either English or Americans; the Indians inform us that they speak the same language with ourselves, and give us proofs of their varacity by repeating many words of English, as musquit, powder, shot, nife, file, damned rascal, sun of a bitch &c."

Equisetum hyemale, the scouring-rush, contains silicon dioxide in its cell walls. The stalks of this common horsetail rush were valuable for Indians as a polishing agent for canoes, walking or gambling sticks, and ar-

row shafts. It can still be used this way, of course: free sandpaper. When dinosaurs ruled the earth, such rushes grew to tree-sized proportions.

Tule, a distinctive native bulrush, was a similarly useful plant. Its stiff but springy stalk served as the basis for sleeping and cooking mats, and its insulating properties were useful in clothing and bedding. The stalks in the wild look like a gaggle of very skinny Berts from *Sesame Street*, beanpoles topped with rooster feathers.

Two other plants are worth mentioning. Wapato, *Sagittaria latifolia*, is an aquatic, fleshy rootstock tuber, harvested by tugging it from the side of a canoe or from the water with a long specially made stick and allow-



ing the potato-like fruit to bob to the surface. The plant's arrowhead-shaped leaves and white flowers are distinctive above the water.

Camas, a member of the lily family, produces a bulb that tastes a bit like a pear after much boiling; Indians set up work camps at harvest time, which was during or shortly after the blooming period in order to distinguish them from the death-camas, which has cream-colored flowers. They used to be so plentiful that to Meriwether Lewis they seemed an illusion: "The quawmash is now in blume and from the colour of its bloom at a short distance it resembles lakes of fine clear water, so complete in this despection that on first sight I could have sworn it was water."

The Tillamook had an interesting method of hunting ducks and geese. They put woven baskets on their heads and covered them with pitch and feathers. Wading low in the water up to their necks, they slowly drifted close to a real bird, who was thus taken by surprise when the men pulled them under the surface to drown them. When hunting elk and deer they sometimes did the same with antlers, or they dug pits or chased them over cliffsides, probably the oldest of all forms of hunting, pre-dating civilization itself.

The Yámana – a tribe of aboriginals living near Tierra del Fuego, on the extreme opposite end of the American landmasses – sent up smoke signals by igniting nearby hillsides to alert everyone in the vicinity when a whale washed up on a beach, a sure way to dispose of all the free meat and oil before it

had a chance to decompose, like the chemical signals of ants used for the same purpose. Given the Northwest Indians' tendency to burn meadows to encourage berry production, such a system for alerting neighbors to beached whales would have been confusing in certain seasons, although the Indians surely could have found a way to color the smoke. It is fun to imagine such scenarios as inspirations for the potlatch festivals that so often tended to spiral out of control. These would have been great sport to watch.*

An ant carries a dead bug into a depression in the sand,

* Footnote: It would be unsurprising, too, to find the Indians gambling on the outcomes of potlatches, which chief will win by losing all and which will commit suicide.

the heel of a footprint. It wiggles its thorax in every direction, scrambling with its back legs – spinning its tires, really – and then launching them into the air by chomping down on the bug with its pincers and doing a headstand, searching with its legs for an overhanging blade of grass or twig. It seems to think I am laughing at it, as indeed I am.

It eventually leaves the bug, scouts a route through the sole of the footprint and through the toes, returns and carries the bug alternately through the uneven trail by both pushing and pulling, as needed. In its way, it has acquired new information and performed logical deductions based on the situation – each footprint, after all, will be different, each demanding new cartographic sorties. If this is not by definition a kind of exploration – with a clear purpose in view – then what is it?





The things that leave a trace in the memory of the land – wagon ruts left behind on the old Oregon Trail, arrowheads in The East and grindstones in The Southwest, or the mound cities of the Eastern woodlands – are the things we find waiting for us when we are born. The people themselves are always gone, but the artifacts linger into the future and continue to speak.

I once found a cache in the forest where I grew up, an assortment of discarded glass jars and ceramic plates, and an entire collar and harness for a team of ploughhorses. They must have been dumped decades earlier by a pioneer, and the possible reasons have haunted my imagination ever since.

Here – in fact, everywhere on this continent – there are areas of raised and flattened land that are the sites of old and otherwise forgotten Indian villages and hunting camps, the naturally prime spots in a given area. Many of these have been recycled for use in the here and now. Some such places in forests are claimed by drug cartels because they are near their marijuana crops and meth stills. Not far away are the remains of army or marine training camps, the work of weekend warriors, reservists getting their one weekend a month out of the way out in the field.

Footprints in some soon-to-be-concreted sand can endure, at the point at which sand turns to sandstone. Prints dated to three-and-a-half million years old that were preserved in volcanic ash near the Olduvai gorge in Africa have been used to reconstruct the upright walking gate (and subse-

quent guesses about other physiological features) of Pliocene human ancestors like *Australopithecus*.

Someday I hope to unearth an intact footprint preserved in the chunks that often crumble from beach cliffs, to trace with a finger the surface of the sand compacted by a long-lost Indian wanderer.

S ANDPIPERS II

Sandpipers don't seem to have much sense of personal identity. They don't plot and scheme like seagulls or crows, don't drip with charisma like cockatiels or parrots, or possess the symbolic or apparitional power of a hummingbird or bald eagle or trumpeter swan. Sandpipers seem to lack any personalities at all except by virtue of the irregularity of their position within the pack – when a slacker is momentarily abandoned by the rest of its group or is startled into panicked flight while its compatriots remain cool. After watching a while the only personality that begins to emerge is that of the pack itself, in the way it shifts and transforms itself around rocks and wavetips and human intruders with expert precision, or flees with dignified ease from worked-up dogs. Humans do this when a sneaker wave rolls in – up and down the beach on a crowded day there are simultaneous moments when all the people flee from the waves, just like sandpipers.

When they move in packs on land – from one part of the beach to another or after having regrouped from the last incoming wave to scamper back in a huddle,



to feed during the several-second pause between waves – they look like a moving carpet, this being an illusion caused by their remarkable ability to remain in position within a formation: a shift on one edge of the group causes the opposite edge to respond to maintain order, the way a tug on a loose thread of carpet can disfigure the whole. That it is also in motion – frenetic motion – lends to the scene a mesmerizing urgency.

Like a marching band in a street parade they show a remarkable uniformity of step, even if their synchronicity leaves something to be desired. Motion capturing and statistical analysis would probably show little variance between the stride of one sandpiper and the next. No strutting or strolling for these birds, just smooth gliding on land or in the air.

This is the ideal, the situation before the cruelty of Nature is factored in, as it always must be.

The survival strategy depends on security in numbers and unbending conformity. There is no individualism, but they don't mind because as long as all goes perfectly as planned there is no need for any – everyone's needs are provided for, all are well-fed and therefore presumably happy. For those few with only one leg – those who fail to meet the demands of the system – there is only ostracism. They are sacrificed for the good of the system itself.

Vehicles are only allowed on a few Oregon beaches and often only in one season. The rules seem to be a little looser in Washington





State, where long stretches of open, hard-packed sand become virtual racecourses on summer weekends in particular.

It is midspring, and the sun is in its apogee and glowing with its full warmth, the high particulate overcast acting like a frosted parabolic reflector – the go-anywhere, shoot-anything light that landscape photographers often bemoan but in which still-life and macro photogra-

phers revel.

I am walking on a sand spit on the northern lip of Gray's Harbor, one of the more spectacular stopovers on a hypothetical birdwatching trip I am plotting in my mind. I've never really been a birdwatcher, but I encounter them frequently enough in the field that it suddenly seems worth the effort. Circling Gray's Harbor – other than a few day trips to the Olympic Peninsula, the

northernmost extent of my travels on the coast – has left me imagining time I do not have and ways I'd like to fill it. The sheer variety of birds is inspiring.

A few cars and pickup trucks zip by me and a few moments later zip by the other way. Most people drive onto the beach because they can. It is easier to see more of the beach more quickly, which seems more than pointless to me, but if I trusted the dual back tires of my pickup to get me out of a jam, I'd probably be driving out here from time to time too.*

The beach is in a populated area, although the bulk of the tourists haven't made it this far north yet. A few police hummers cruise the beach, stop periodically and loiter before zooming smoothly off. They are as unconcerned as most of the others I see passing me, not at all annoyed by the loud whine, petulant and uneven, of the engine of the little beat-up hatchback that weaves in and out of the surf, scattering clouds of sandpipers and plovers, increasing speed to cut through an outgoing wave, then into another knot of birds – a few tiny bodies thrown into the air here and there to splash down in the churning surf or land with a pathetic thud in the sand.

The western sandpiper is not an endangered bird, or even threatened. There is not much difference in the final calculus between a car driven gleefully through a tangle of sandpipers and a hawk or osprey plucking a few here and there for food, but the sentiments behind the actions speak to the differences between the perpetrators. The driver – drunk or not but swinish beyond doubt – seems to *resent* Nature.

* Footnote: I am a natural coward when it comes to offroading, or at least when I am perfectly alone and my truck is so vital to my way of life. I am fearless – nee, reckless – on an ATV, but I do not own one, which is probably a good thing.

There is an understandable thrill to driving a car through the surf (probably), venting steam and letting go. That the driver knows he is killing other creatures and seems to enjoy it illuminates the disconnect: the cruelty of human nature can apparently also be fun, for some kinds of people, I guess.

I feel my stomach turn, and go Home.

The One-Legged sandpipers always stand out from the pack while on land – in the air they look exactly like the rest. They don't run at all; they hop. If the pack is a moving carpet, the one-legged member is the torn thread, not only a disobedient thread in the network of threads, but an irrelevant, severed one.

But the hope of the still-living is indomitable, even when one is defective, damaged, or otherwise unfit.

The first One-Legger becomes obvious the moment the flock lands and begins to fan out to hunt bugs and shellfish – as well as the young fry of fish that wash in the surf by the thousands at certain times of the year, made visible by squiggly movement in the last few cups of water of an incoming wave, right where sandpipers like to feed. It hops while the others scurry, and I feel a twinge of sympathy.

The second is followed quickly by a third – this group of about twenty sandpipers has three One-Legged invalids in it. As I puzzle over the odds of coincidence and try to calculate the possibilities and probabilities – maybe the three were once normal, but an attack of eagles or foxes has mutilated this tribe, or a human could be responsible, of course – I find I no longer care: all three of the handicapped birds have found each other along

the edge of the surf and are now acting together, hopping in near-unison at the fringe of the crowd, ganging up for the security of the new breed, Gangstas again.

For a few moments longer I watch them to be sure I'm right, and I am; they are holding it together.

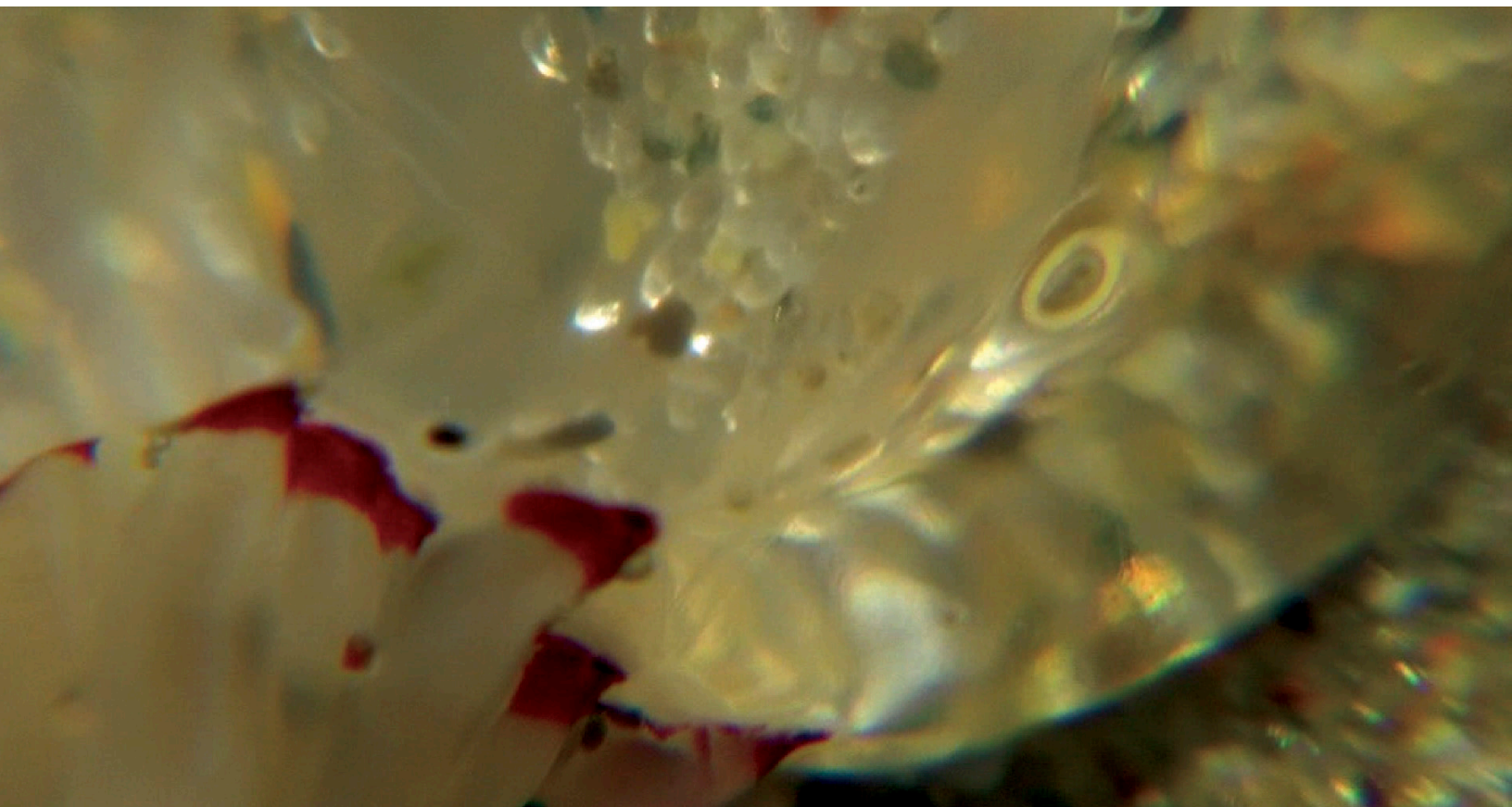
A N EXPLOSION OF BLOODWORMS

On another wide and vacant beach on the Washington Coast I am walking along weeks-old tire tracks that persist in the sand – the weight of the vehicle, whatever it was, has packed the sand tightly, making the steps I

take a little easier; the same advantage can be had on steeper beaches than this one by following the shoreline over the sand packed tight by the surf, or stepping in the footprints of others.

I am barefoot, as I usually am, pantlegs pulled up to my knees, shoelaces tied together and shoes slung over a shoulder, socks tucked into the soles. The setup also provides me a place to put my water bottle, snugly at the bottom of the shoe hanging in front, next to my chest. With a long straw I could sip while I walked, the way fat guys wear beer hats at baseball games.

My path is rerouted by an area of the beach cordoned off from the rest by generously spaced white signs on posts driven into the ground, posts that when the signs are removed during the offseason are sometimes used by kite-fliers as tethering posts. During this part of the



year the signs are up. They read:

PROTECTED AREA

SNOWY PLOVER BREEDING AREA

I wander down to the edge of the surf to avoid the protected area and continue walking. The local water is warmed by spring currents from California and Hawaii and the sun has emerged, warming the shallow, long-running waves further. The water itself looks a bit stale and dirty, the fizzy seafoam like carbonated pond scum, brown and green with algae.

I stroll through it anyway. The bottoms of my feet are themselves an unflattering tone as a result of all my footloose wandering – they have become calloused and thick, the feet of a beggar even while cleansed by the salty warm surf. But they aren't so numbed that the sensation isn't exhilarating, like a cool breeze on the back of the neck on a sticky day.

But the sand here, which ought to be concreted by the constant pressure of the waves, is instead slightly springy, my footprints disappearing behind me almost as soon as I take the next step, like the way the glowing sidewalk squares and stair steps trailing Michael Jackson in the "Billie Jean" video go dark the moment he lifts his weight from them, one of the earliest music video images in Pop history.

I pretend for a while, my steps light and springy.

When the next wave rolls in – an especially large wave that rolls right by up to my calves, a casual sneaker wave – I discover why. A writhing mass of wiry red worms erupt from a bed of them buried beneath my

feet, taking the opportunity of a liberating flood to be carried off, wriggling madly, to a new Home. Stunned for a moment, I feel them thrashing between my toes, clinging to the tops of my feet with the grabbiness of their tube-like skin, corkscrewing their way up my ankles.

Sneaker waves have a way of exposing latent athletic ability, calling forth hidden reserves of energy and well-concealed vigor. I used to be a pretty good sprinter in high school, mostly because I hit a growth spurt that for a while made me considerably taller and leaner than my classmates. In my adult life I have, in pathetic truth, only run at top speed a handful of times.

The sneaker wave embedded with bloodworms, then – I now see that it is not a localized explosion, the disgusting worms stretching for at least one hundred feet in every direction, thousands if not tens of thousands or more – is like the starting pistol of the See-If-You-Can-Still-Run event of a Summer Olympiad, an exhibition event with miraculous endings and inevitable defeats, and the only one for which I might ever qualify.

It turns out that I can, and I do. To this day I'm not sure what exact species of worm I stepped in. To be honest, the less I now about them the better.



SANDPIPERS III

If the migration south in fall is a chaotic and casual affair, the northward spring migration is its opposite – a frenzied exodus, a jumping off. The Arctic tundra is in bloom and new life is spewing forth; the season will be short enough for the sandpipers to breed and raise their chicks and made only more so by procrastination.

I have been here at the edge of Gray's Harbor for nearly a week, watching the accumulation of sandpipers using this place as a spot to fatten up for the journey – there are now thousands of them. There is an urgency in their movements that is almost oppressive. They swarm around, they mob me. The beach is the busiest I have ever seen on any western beach – including those in sunny and crowded southern California – in terms of sheer numbers of individuals.

An odd thing happens when there are so many of them in one place – the discrete flocking behavior ceases, and they are flying amoeba-whales no more: they are now a madding crowd, a congregation of natural pilgrims. Gone are the giant shifting creatures, replaced by a chimerical vision made of little dots with legs, too many to make visual sense of them all. The individual packs are all melted and merged together, and I am reminded of the closing ceremonies of an Olympiad. I try to identify a few One-Leggers amongst the multitude, but the constant motion and sheer numbers – they stretch both ways as far I can see – makes it impossible.

I am reminded again of a city, a bubblingly vibrant megalopolis to compare with the simmering and unsteady metropolii of autumn. The way they rush madly

about, now practically oblivious to my presence, every bird for itself – if this city had a clock tower, the gradations would be in hundredths of a second, perhaps thousandths. Their pace is not mine, and it is so fast that I cannot keep up. I am sure I am missing something about their behavior not because I am not watching closely enough, but because my eyes are too slow to see it.

Like the pace of the human heartbeat, the human sense of the passage of time is determined by the deductive logic of Nature – it is the pace to which we've evolved. The sandpipers have their own pacing, their own scales of time, and I have mine.

Unlike the scales of time by which we are all measured as individuals, these scales measure the rules by which must play whole species, and their gradations are peculiar to each. They are capable of what to me seem to be quantum decisions, faster than the human eye and faster even than a digital camera shutter, except as clipped from time by happy accident.

All that is left is to start.

There is no sign whatsoever, no hush the moment before it occurs as one might imagine. The hush comes after, when they are simply gone, almost all of them, just a grayish smudge over the shoulder of the northernmost cape on the horizon.

It is possible that there was some kind of starting gun – a regularly-scheduled blast at a nearby quarry, perhaps – unavailable to the human ear. If so, it goes without saying, I didn't hear one. Nor did I feel one as a vibration in the ground, only as a vibration in the atmosphere as so many birds took wing, tiny as they each

individually might be, at once: all together, they are intimidating altogether.

A mass migration and a migratory mass, as naturally religious an experience as a total eclipse. In under five minutes I am all alone, save for a few malingerers. I notice a few One-Leg Gang members have opted to stay behind, perhaps too tired to yet risk the journey; others, however, must surely have joined the jump-off, the flying wounded off to contribute their still perfectly good genes to the Arctic gene pool.

I imagine they take a whole stretch of the Alaskan wilderness for themselves, a colony of hopping One-Legs, the baddest gang on the blooming tundra.

GOOD ADVICES

Midsummer sunrise, and kids clatter by on scooters so cheaply made – of real metal of a sort, it is worth noting – that they may as well be riding chainsaws. They are of the type popular in the 1950's, a type spoofed in the movie *Back to the Future*: tiny ill-made wheels on the bottom of a skateboard, with a folding handle attached for hanging on (or falling over). I'd guess the materials and labor cost about three dollars to the manufacturer, and they sound like it.

Other children mill about, loiter, throw rocks and hang from trees like monkeys. Many lounge near their chubby parents all day. Kids recreate the way they see their parents do it.

I wander through a campground more or less aimlessly in the afternoon. It is the kind of pointless walking some people do when they live in the suburbs, what city-dwellers do when they grow tired of the insides of buildings: simply go out the front door and walk, for the simple relief of being outdoors and walking.

This loop of the campground is dormant for the winter. Wooden barricades reading "Campground Closed" straddle the asphalt where the loop breaks from the rest of the park. The old utility boxes – the posts on which the electric and water hookups are mounted at each site – here are being replaced. The new ones have been installed but are still hooded in white foam sleeves, as if they were all very short prisoners awaiting execution by firing squad.

A message board kiosk stands along the trail in this mothballed quarter of the park. Wandering aimlessly as I am, I mosey up to look at the papers pinned with thumbtacks to the corkboard behind plexiglas, to read what is writ therein.

The pages are the collected efforts of children, the results of an attempt by adults to kill time, maybe on a long-gone rainy afternoon – to keep the kids busy. The drawings are executed in crayon on identical sheets of paper, probably leftovers from an earlier game of "What can we have them do that will keep them quiet?" On each page is printed an identical black and white outline of a bird with a long beak and webbed feet, shown in profile. Underneath each is printed the bird's common name:

BLACK OYSTERCATCHER

The coloring-book exercise was evidently combined with a health and safety lecture (in retrospect, it was

probably the result of a ranger-led program sponsored by the park). The kids have written advice on the margins of the pages, regurgitating what they have learned, things like: "Always look both ways before crossing the street!" and "Stay off of beach logs!"

The simplicity of one drawing catches my eye. The bird is only partially colored-in, with gray crayon marks that obey no rules – the kid has simply scribbled on the bird here and there. But he – the precision and concision of the general sloppiness convinces me it was a boy, although I have no proof because the artist didn't bother even to sign it – has added one innovation to his masterpiece at least: he has created a speech bubble coming from the oystercatcher's pointed beak, so that rather than floating free in the empty space around the bird as the others have rendered it, the safety advice comes directly from the bird itself. The letters of the words inside have been partially outlined, as if he finished his drawing before the other children and was killing time outlining the letters before he gave up even on that.

Without qualifying clauses and free of context of any kind, the advice he has the black oystercatcher imparting to the world – to any stranger who might be wandering pointlessly by – is wonderfully simple and, it seems to me, quite useful.

What the bird says is this:

WEAR A HELMET.



“In the forenoon we were visited by a Clatsop & Seven Chinnooks from whome I purchased a Sea otter’s Skin and two hats made of way tape and Silk grass and white cedar bark. they remained untill late in the evening and departed for their village. those people are not readily obstructed by waves in their Canoes. Since their departure we have discovered that they have Stole an ax.”

– William Clark

“The Cuthlahmahs left us this evening on their way to the Catsops, to whom they purpose bartering their wappetoe for the blubber and oil of the whale, which the latter purchased for beads &c. from the Killamucks; in this manner there is a trade continually carryed on by the natives of the river each trading some article or other with their neighbours above and below them; and thus articles which are vended by the whites at the entrance of this river, find their way to the most distant nations inhabiting it’s waters.”

– Meriwether Lewis



IN TRANSIT

At the center of Tugman State Park is Eel Lake, one of the fresh-water lakes prevented from draining to the ocean by the squeezing weight of the gigantic dunes that stand – and travel – in the way. The area is choked with swamps that become ponds in spring, and other year-round holes in unexpected places, the streams from which cut through the forests into the dunes and sometimes still fail to make the ocean, their water instead vanishing into them, trickling and filtering into a sandy aquifer buried somewhere below.

VII

A hiking trail leads around the lake and through some big trees but ultimately goes nowhere. I have heard plans to extend the trail all the way around the lake – over twenty miles – but the state lacks the money to do it. For now, a kayak gets the exploration work done.

I bought a kayak in Louisiana. It is small, blue, and fast. It is great for shots of lilypads and other things that can only be seen from a boat, but I am rarely bold enough to take my most expensive camera and macro lens with me, the scenario thus established being too good a setup for tragedy for



cally as in any other sense. I feel like Private Joker from *Full Metal Jacket*, my camera has become the most important thing I own, its preservation critical to me for reasons I don't yet comprehend. It's just a thing that can be replaced, but I hold it to my chest like a baby. How can I become so attached to a *thing*?

it not to happen. I take a cheaper camera that is only valuable in sentimental terms (and that fits into a buoyant dry bag).

Newts swim alongside me. I see turtles, dragonflies, birds, raccoons and miscellaneous swamp rats that can only be seen from the cockpit of a kayak, my camera stuffed into a dry bag under the seat.* Here again in theory I could explore without End.

My camera becomes at times like an avatar – a thing that must be protected at all costs, as much so symboli-

* Footnote: Dry bags are strong synthetic bags that can be rolled tightly and clamped to near waterproofness, easy to open, close, and carry. I use them to store camera equipment while kayaking, but they are also good for keeping sand and water out while at the beach. A little air left in the bag also serves to cushion and buoy the camera and lenses in cases of mild photographer carelessness (such as when leaving one's camera in a place prone to sneaker waves) or even shocking carelessness (dropping it, throwing it, et cetera).

The Oregon myrtle (in California, it is the California laurel) is native in Southern Oregon and grows only along the coast. The leaves can be used in place of bay leaves in recipes, and should your dog or cat enjoy sleeping with you in bed you can put the leaves in your mattress to get rid of fleas.

The city of North Bend ran out of cash during the Great Depression and resolved the dilemma by printing myrtlewood disks to be used as hard currency, actual wooden nickels (although the lowest denomination was twenty-five cents). When the crisis was over the city proclaimed the little tokens to be legal tender in their city in perpetuity, but it is filthy lucre: the Oregon myrtle is one of the two carriers of the spores that cause sudden oak death.

I contemplate the psychogeography of beaches. There is isolation but there is also air – pure blank physical space. Nothingness, and this is appealing for its simplicity: its *possibilities*.

We could fly a kite here. We could play Jarts. Paper-airplane contest, or a good old-fashioned game of catch. Open space feeds the active imagination and clears the lungs, and other organs. Most importantly, it replaces the manmade with the natural – the visual inputs are not born of a limited human imagination: we can relate to it as living organisms, which in the most fundamental sense we can be certain we are.

Most people assume several identities at different times of the day, dual roles and ensemble parts, as leading or supporting actors, depending on the scene. Our identity *here* is without question. How often can that honestly be said? It depends on how much time we spend outside, I suppose.

In some jobs – those in which a person can both win and lose several times a day, like a stockbroker (or a photographer) – one can feel cumulatively like a god or a goat, depending on the latest moment's outcome. Past successes and failures are gone in an instant. Contemplating Nature and one's place in the universe, there is no distinction at all. All that counts is to be alive.

I often find myself at a crossroads of the campground, parked in the middle of the prevailing traffic patterns, where kids in full gallop blaze new trails through my backyard. My trailer is just an obstacle, like a car parked in a parking lot with a playground on the other side of it.





They stream through following the leader having passed through to stop, turn, and stare back to urge the stragglers on after them. They pour through the new route, new migratory corridors forged and open for business.

There is a remarkable uniformity to their routes – once found they are remembered and reused until someone at last spots me sitting and reading by my dormant firepit. I smile at them while one of the oldest corrals them and whispers: “We have to stay on the trails!”

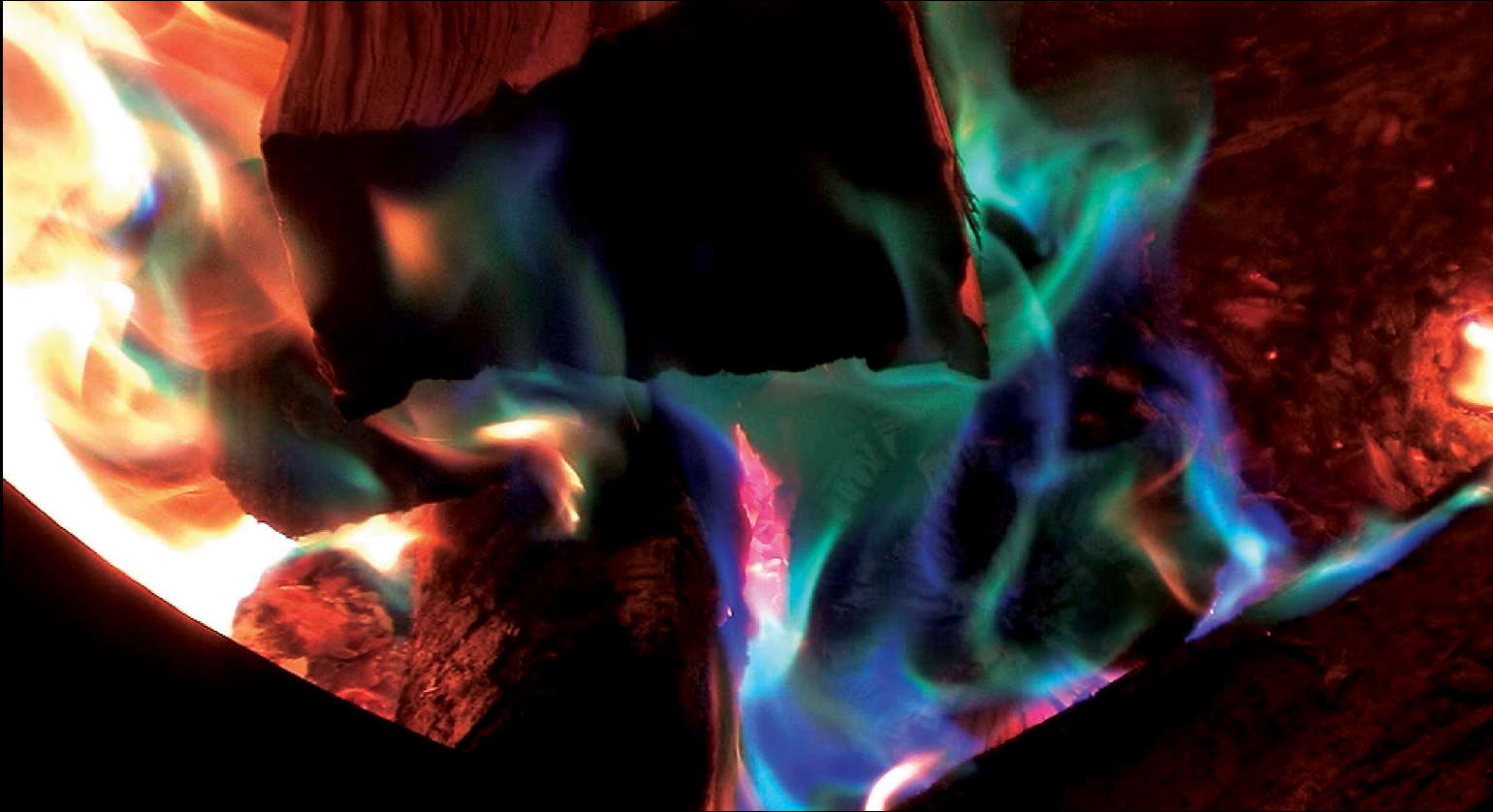
T H E V A L U E O F I G - N O R A N C E T O E X - P L O R E R S

On their return journey from the Pacific, Lewis and Clark and the *Corps of Discovery* stopped near Pompey's Pillar in what is now Montana, an unusual sandstone formation that was named after the infant son of Charbonneau and Sacagawea. A discovery was made in the nearby sandstone outcroppings, and Clark examined it. In his journal, he here describes a rib-bone of

a great fish that has been petrified somehow into the mountain.

While venturing on the coast, Clark had more than once organized trips devoted solely to seeing what was

Ecola Beach.* The explorers wanted to purchase some of the oil the Indians were harvesting from the blubber of the dead whale, although Clark mentioned that the Indians seemed “penurious” and hated to part with this unexpected bounty from the sea – a reticence under-



around them. He seems to have been the ringleader of these sightseeing expeditions, entertaining a band of bored but practical tourists – and the first to suggest a lovely walk to the beach.

Clark and several men from his party visited the site of a whale carcass that had washed up on what is now

standable in retrospect, given the extreme hazards of hunting living whales with hand weapons from canoes

* Footnote: In his diary, he gives the Indian name as “E cu-la,” meaning “whale.” Given the importance of the whale blubber in the diary, we can assume he got the name right; otherwise, the Indians and the whites were unable to communicate except by sign language and Chinook Jargon.



on the open ocean, the *Pacific Ocean*.

Sacagawea, having escorted the party from the rolling, arid expanse of The Great Plains, pleaded to be allowed to go to see the whale now that they had reached the End.

Clark, being Clark, relented.

This experience still quite fresh in his memory when he confronted the mysterious bone in Montana, he made a great – if somewhat false – leap of scientific imagination: at one point a great sea must have covered the country here, and this enormous bone must surely therefore be the rib bone of some long-gone giant fish.

The beaches and mountains of the era would have probably looked similar to today's coast except for two major visual elements now missing – the grasses would have been absent (as well, of course, as most of the human infrastructure) and everywhere would have towered old-growth forests, provoking everywhere the same distortion of “normal” perspective that can still be found in the few existing redwood forests and the pockets of old-growth forest remaining here in Oregon's protected state and national forests. The sky would have seemed both larger and more distant to observers on the ground, and bodies of water would have reflected in them the stout bases of giant spruces and pines (as well as redwoods) and the spidery root systems of nurse

log-raised hemlocks and cedars. The Indians didn't log trees, and certainly didn't clear-cut: everywhere Lewis and Clark went west of the Mississippi would have been archaic, weird, and eerily beautiful in a way it no longer is.

The "rib bone" was actually a thigh bone, and it came not from a great fish but from a creature that would surely have been as astonishing to Clark if he knew the truth as would have been the true timescales involved, although this is perhaps to do a disservice to the scientific imagination of an explorer of such natural energy.

The bone was from a duck-billed dinosaur.

At the moment of discovery, however, it is the elasticity of Clarks' imagination that is interesting. His recent experience of travel and exploration must have convinced him of the countless possibilities of the world in which he lived – in effect, loosened and liberated his imagination – which in turn allowed him to momentarily slip free of the limits of his time and place: to imagine at least for as long as it took for his eureka moment to arrive not only a changed landscape involving an ancient ocean covering enough of now landlocked Montana to accommodate such a monstrous fish – and an idea which pre-dated the theory of "continental drift," precursor of modern plate tectonics, by decades – but also allowed for such a time span as it would have taken for the western American interior he had just crossed twice – was still crossing, technically – to be lifted from the oceans and fish flesh to become petrified into a hillside.*

* Footnote: The modern theory of plate tectonics was unrecognized within the scientific community until well into the Twentieth Century. For 1806 this kind of deductive imagination is remarkable!

What an incredible place he must have imagined in his mind's eye, there in the oldest wilds of The Wild Old West. The world must have seemed unbelievably strange and perhaps so organically absurd on its own that embellishment might never again be necessary. The effect on his sense of reality would have been profound, and the adventure and discovery of things new to science – unsuspected corners of the map, now filled in – must have had a spasmodic effect on his imagination. He can be forgiven for grasping for major new truths and almost getting them.**

In fact, Clark in his mind's eye was probably imagining the Biblical Flood, a predilection to look to scripture to explain phenomenon, and one found in many of his place and time. On the other hand, Clark sounds like a humanist in his personal notebook when he copies a favorite quote from Thomas Paine that bears repeating here: "Man cannot make principles, he can only discover them. The most formidable weapon against errors of every kind, is Reason. I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy."

But when it came to understanding the Indians from whom they bought their oil, Lewis and Clark only had part of the true picture. In the United States, after all, whale oil was cheaply and easily found. For Indians, a free whale carcass thrown onto land by the sea was not a thing squandered easily.

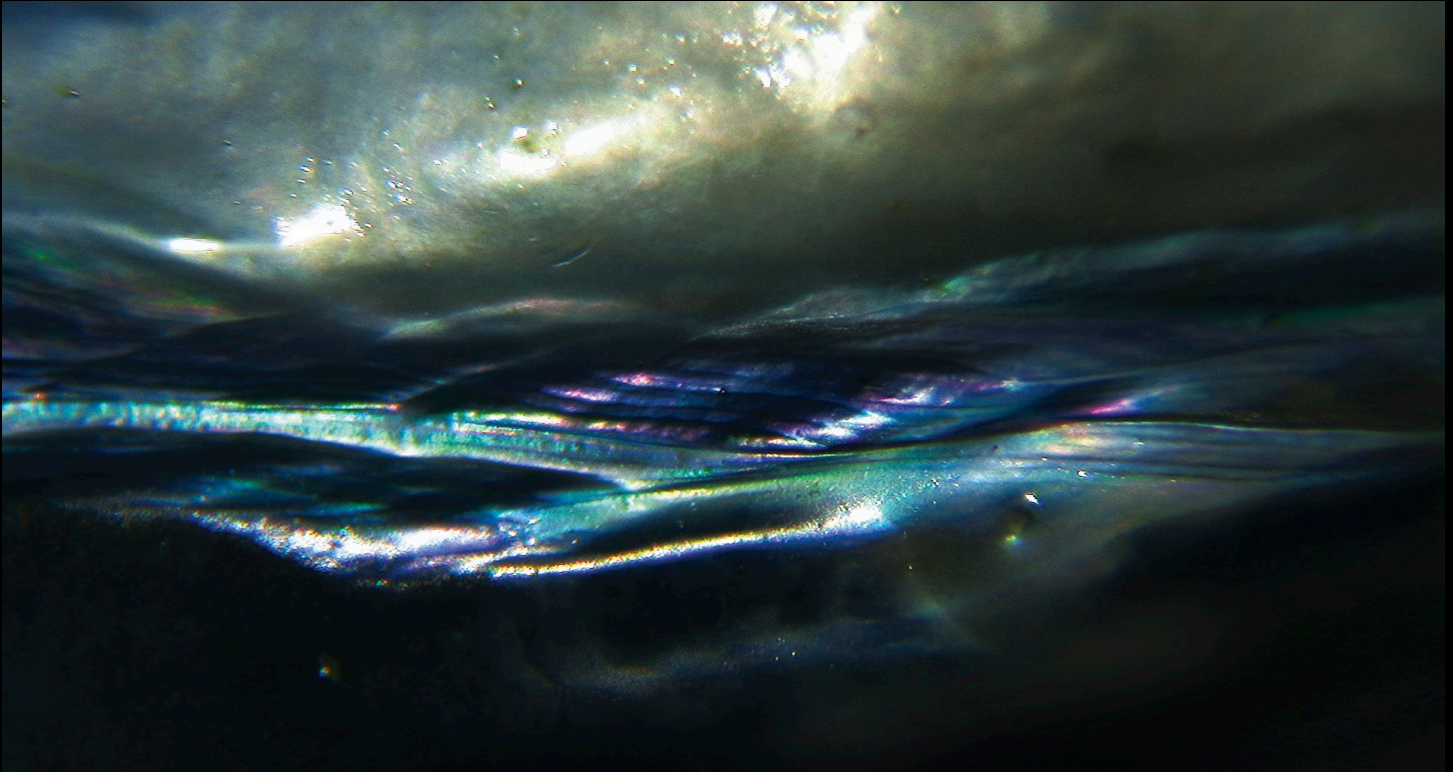
Fear of the ocean was so ingrained in the cultures of the coastal Indians that omens could be read in the sub-

** Footnote: At the same time, Clark seems to be as blind to the possibilities of cause and effect as many of his era, as when he describes a panther at Fort Clatsop: "this animal is scarce in the country where they exist and are so remarkable shy and watchfull that it is extremely difficult to kill them."

conscious wanderings of dreams: to dream of travel eastward – where lay the meadows of the Willamette Valley and its elk-studded (and, in those days occasionally even buffalo-studded) streams and prairies – was to dream of bounty and riches and long life. To dream of going west was to dream of pending disaster.

When the Indians looked west, they saw only death.

an effect on Clark's thinking in Montana: "I Saw Indians walking up and down the beach which I did not at first understand the Cause of, one man came to where I was and told me that he was in Search of fish which is frequently thrown up on Shore and left by the tide, and told me the 'Sturgeon was very good' and that the water when it retired left fish which they eat this was Conclusive evidence to me that this Small band de-



Giant sturgeon washed up on Pacific beaches at that time. A ten-foot-long Pacific sturgeon is described in their diaries, a curious sight that may also have had

ended in Some Measure for their winters Subsistence on the fish which is thrown on Shore and left by the tide." One population of white sturgeons still roams the mouth of the Columbia River, but all other populations in the area have become landlocked by dams.

The sturgeon now missing from these waters were a staple food for the Indians of the coast during Lewis and Clark's time. They were "abandoned by the sea," and therefore to the Indians, it must have been as if the gods of the sea were delivering these ten-foot-long feasts as gifts. Along with the hundred-foot-long whale carcass, the sight of these giant sturgeon must have played on Clark's imagination like the rain on the roof of Fort Clatsop, the subject of really big fish already on his mind – perhaps lurking in the back of his subconscious as in nightmares – when he made his great deductive leap.

Lewis and Clark went to pains to differentiate between the various tribes they encountered, unlike many of the whites who came both before and after them. Aside from their stinginess with whale blubber, the Indians from whom they purchased the oil – the Tillamook – were described in generally positive terms as friendly and clean.

The Indians of the lower Columbia, however, were thieves and goldiggers. Was this difference inherent in the people themselves, or were other factors at work?

By the time the explorers reached the lower Columbia Valley, white fur traders had already been trading with the river tribes for many years, and had already introduced smallpox to the people with whom they traded. The long, sad story of the decimation of the Indians of the Northwest had already begun. Lewis and Clark, had they been able to look with more educated eyes, might have been able to see the connections that we can see so clearly in hindsight, but their knowledge would have helped nothing: once ticking, the clock of infectious contagion could never have been stopped –

the hard math of pestilence.

Clark recorded his eyewitness account of the moment we can say that he and Meriwether Lewis saw the future of the Indians, but he still can't resist taking another swipe at their kleptomaniacal tendencies: "I Saw one man & one woman who appeared to be all in Scabs, & Several men with the venereal, their other Disorders and the remedies for them I could not learn we divided Some ribin between the men of our party to bestow on their favourite Lasses, this plan to Save the knives & more valueable articles."

Only one generation later, Abraham Lincoln would make a similar mistake in his inability to imagine a peaceful multiracial society which, if not for his failure of the imagination (and almost surely if not for John Wilkes Booth's bullet) might have arrived sooner than it has. Nice as it seems in retrospect, it is nibbling of me to expect Lincoln to have seen into the future, especially since I know how *his* future turned out.*

Lewis and Clark imposed a state of naïve ignorance on the Indians in their descriptions of them that was in fact its opposite: the Indian tribes were learning how to trade with the whites – as evidenced by the rising prices charged by Indians for both furs and whale oil – and it was actually the naïve ignorance of Lewis and Clark that was to blame for most of the failures.

* Footnote: Although I believe he briefly did. Lincoln glimpsed the future when he entered a newly conquered Richmond and a crowd of freed slaves fell at his feet as if he were a god. After admonishing them and assuring him he was not a god – and showing more restraint than Alexander the Great ever managed, it should be noted – they rose and sang a hymn for him instead, saluting him with what must have been some truly sweet soul music as their liberator – and their president. I think in that moment he briefly considered feats of imagination he had never managed prior to it. Two weeks later he was dead, and the misery of Reconstruction started without him.



But the latter is an ignorance that is only discovered as events turn into history. It is unhistorical to blame historical figures for a lack of insight that to us – with the benefit of hindsight afforded by history itself – ought to have seemed obvious.

Herein is seen the dual nature of the value of ignorance to explorers. The duckbilled dinosaur-cum-fish-rib story illustrates a great but semi-wrong leap of the imagination, which itself feeds a form of ignorance as well as a form of knowledge – all three of which Clark had in abundance. The failure to grasp the differences between the Indian tribes of the coast – and the reasons

for them – was the result of a lack of knowledge and imagination and therefore a failure of them.

Both involve the oddest specimen of the varied species of logic: something that, in ignorance, looks like something else.

When they returned east, Lewis and Clark reported both the helpful nature of the Tillamooks and the perceived decadence and debauchery of the already-diseased Chinooks. Given the governmental (and military) nature of the *Corps of Discovery* and the tendency for governmental and military leaders to take commissioned re-



As European exploration of the coast proceeded past its earliest years, the Spanish and British quickly realized that they had so thoroughly explored the coast that if a Northwest passage existed, it must have been deliberately omitted from the maps they were using – the results of acts of misinformation perpetrated and spread by their rivals (in other words, by one another) so as each to monopolize the fur trade.

ports at face value, peruse summaries rather than delve into details, and make decisions based on whims, it is reasonable to assume that the journals – so long held from public view – would have been used to formulate official policy in Washington, D.C. for years to come.

Pessimism and optimism when combined suggest a lack of understanding. The European understanding – the *misunderstanding* – of the place was based on a belief in symmetrically “designed” geography. They believed that the terrain must necessarily follow the laws of geometry, and that a “pyramidal height-of-land” must dictate the flow of all riverine systems, even those of the complicated (and largely unexplored) American West.

An anonymous author of journals recounting the voyages of the Spanish schooners *Sutil* and *Mexicana* – published under the title *A Spanish Voyage to Vancouver and the Northwest Coast of America* – describes the problem: “There was hardly a single point on the coast between 37 degrees north and 60 degrees north which had not been visited by these ships, and so, if we have no detailed and accurate map based on the results of these voyages, it is because those who discovered a harbour or entry which had not been known before, and where they ... were able to secure skins at a profit ... concealed the news of their discovery, in the expectation that they would be able for a long while to carry on an exclusive trade...”

A relative few sailing vessels visited the Oregon Coast proper – being scared off by the rocks and shoalwaters

of a furious sea and a frequently impenetrable fog – except by way of its rivers and handful of natural harbors. This place abounds in rumor and accident, and the legends and outright fantasies of the exploration or accidental “discovery” of this shore are Fun to read: they involve castaway fishermen from Japan, tossed north and east by storms to the point that they are caught in the Japanese current, Chinese adventurers and monks, fanciful maps made and place names bestowed by frauds and charlatans, wild theories of geography posed as fact, as if the land could be discovered first in the mind and would then conform itself in reality to those daydreams.*

California, for instance, was long supposed by the Span- ish to be an island – mainly because it would facilitate trade the most right where Spain most needed a short- cut. Oregon was supposed to consist mainly of one great inland lake – the Sea of the West – complete with the long-fancied strait that connected easily with the eastward-flowing rivers – the River of the West.** Entire voyages of exploration are conjured out of thin air, and they stick in the imagination as easily as if they had been real: a fake voyage of Juan de Fuca resulted in the strait named in his honor, the little nick taken out of the extreme northwest corner of the map of the US that owes its name to a hoax intended to strengthen Spanish claims to the land.

* Footnote: Nehalem Bay on the North Coast especially seems to be an epicenter of odd stories involving treasure, suspected Spanish settlements and pockets of remnant populations that contributed non- native genetics to the locals, along with the chunks of Asian beeswax.

** Footnote: In fact, there used to be an enormous inland sea that extended the length of the Willamette Valley and probably resembled the Puget Sound of Washington, but it dried up two dozen million years ago.

The explorer’s lifestyle is endangered not only by the dwindling – or gone altogether – blank spots on the maps, but by some of the areas already filled in. One need only look at the ever-changing, ever-suspect maps of the Northwest in history – the image of it that was relied upon as gospel truth, the whimsical, semi-ran- domized shifting of half a continent and bottomless bodies of water that only existed in the minds of the cartographers or in the darkest depths of geological time (which, on such time scales, is behaving as the maps show, in a theoretical way).***

These are really only theories that happen to match overwhelming evidence and result in broad scientific consensus. The fact remains that we really don’t know for certain, nor, on time scales like these will we ever actually see it happen.

There are no genuinely undiscovered places in Ameri- ca today. The map is completely filled in now and here it Ends, and will become no larger (or at least no time soon).****

How do great explorers see the world? When describ- ing a new place or its people, where do their most hu- man instincts and interests lie, and what do they all have in common?

The urge to see what’s around the next corner is surely

*** Footnote: The Juan de Fuca Plate – another nomenclatural coup for the dubious explorer – is very, very slowly sliding under the North American Plate, thus slowly accruing new land at the Edge of the continent, where in effect shavings of the Earth’s crust are piling up like those of a pencil in a pencil sharpener.

**** Footnote: The geological forces will eventually create new land unless the oceans – which are already rising faster – rise faster still.



at the heart of it – mere curiosity. But I suspect that there is also always an inextinguishable hope that they will discover something heretofore unseen and unexpected, not only a thing they've never seen before but also a whole new variety of experience: something *no one* has seen before.

The most-celebrated explorations in history are often

those embarked upon in sparkingly clear naiveté, the goals vague and open-ended, latitude for personal decision-making wide. American history has two very clear examples – Christopher Columbus and Lewis and Clark – as well as the most dramatic example of its polar opposite, the moon landing.*

An explorer is one meant to bring forth new wisdoms, to replace ignorance with knowledge. In many ways this task is made easier the purer the ignorance is to begin with. Incorrect or misleading information – or correct information that has been misinterpreted – is often more useless than no information at all.

I wonder if the day of the lone adventurer is over. Of physical space on the dry surface of this planet still fit for genuine exploration there is little or none. Any extraplanetary exploration will always require authorization from proper authorities and deep, deep, deep pockets, which amount to the same things. It is an utterly depressing age for those of us who fantasize about the purity of our adventures, the virginity of the terra incognita: a sad state of affairs unless civilization completely collapses (itself an odd prospect, as it always seems to be both impossible and perfectly feasible at the same time – I'm not holding my breath).

In the summer of 1579, Sir Francis Drake – fresh from his piratical harassment of the Spanish in the Caribbean – sailed up the Pacific Coast in his galleon *The Golden Hind* seeking the mythical Strait of Anian,

* Footnote: For which there was virtually no room for personal choice on behalf of the explorers, unless one takes NASA or humanity to be the true explorers as opposed to the astronauts themselves – I do not subscribe to this point of view any more than I give Thomas Jefferson credit for the feats of the *Corps of Discovery*, or Queen Isabella credit for any particular exploratory daring.



those who came after him.*

Historicity here seems to be less important than potential tourist bucks. Drake in the San Francisco bay area is a significant lure for thousands of merchants and hoteliers (and pseudo-historians); Drake in Nehalem Bay benefits no one but perhaps the few who live here. And so Drake made his repairs in San Francisco and not any of the other innumerable inlets on this near-endless shoreline, a consensus reached ultimately on tourist dollars, it would

which he hoped would take him back to England. In papers that have come down to us, Drake suggests he stopped for repairs in a bay around forty-four degrees north latitude (or possibly thirty-eight degrees) before sailing again around Cape Horn and across the Atlantic.

Where precisely Drake landed for repairs is disputed. A bay near San Francisco is often mentioned by San Francisco-based observers, but this is to ignore the proclivity for misinformation and mind games regarding the fabled Passage to India of the times, an Elizabethan gift for propaganda that reached absurd proportions among the early English, Spanish, and French explorers of the Pacific. Drake's notes can hardly be accepted at face value, anyway, as also the notes and maps of

seem.**

* Footnote: Queen Elizabeth herself seems to be the driving force behind the secrecy. On his return to England, she took all of his notes and maps and swore him and his men to eternal silence on pain of death. The notes were only published years later and were heavily censored – it does not take a giant leap of imagination to imagine they were also utterly falsified in some cases. As historical documents they leave something to be desired because they leave so much to the imagination.

** Footnote: In 2012 Drake's Bay will be officially recognized by the federal Department of the Interior as the site of Drake's New Albion, the Bay Area's economy being not the only one to potentially benefit. But unless significant archaeological evidence is discovered – it has not been, in my opinion – the debate will rage forever, as it ought.

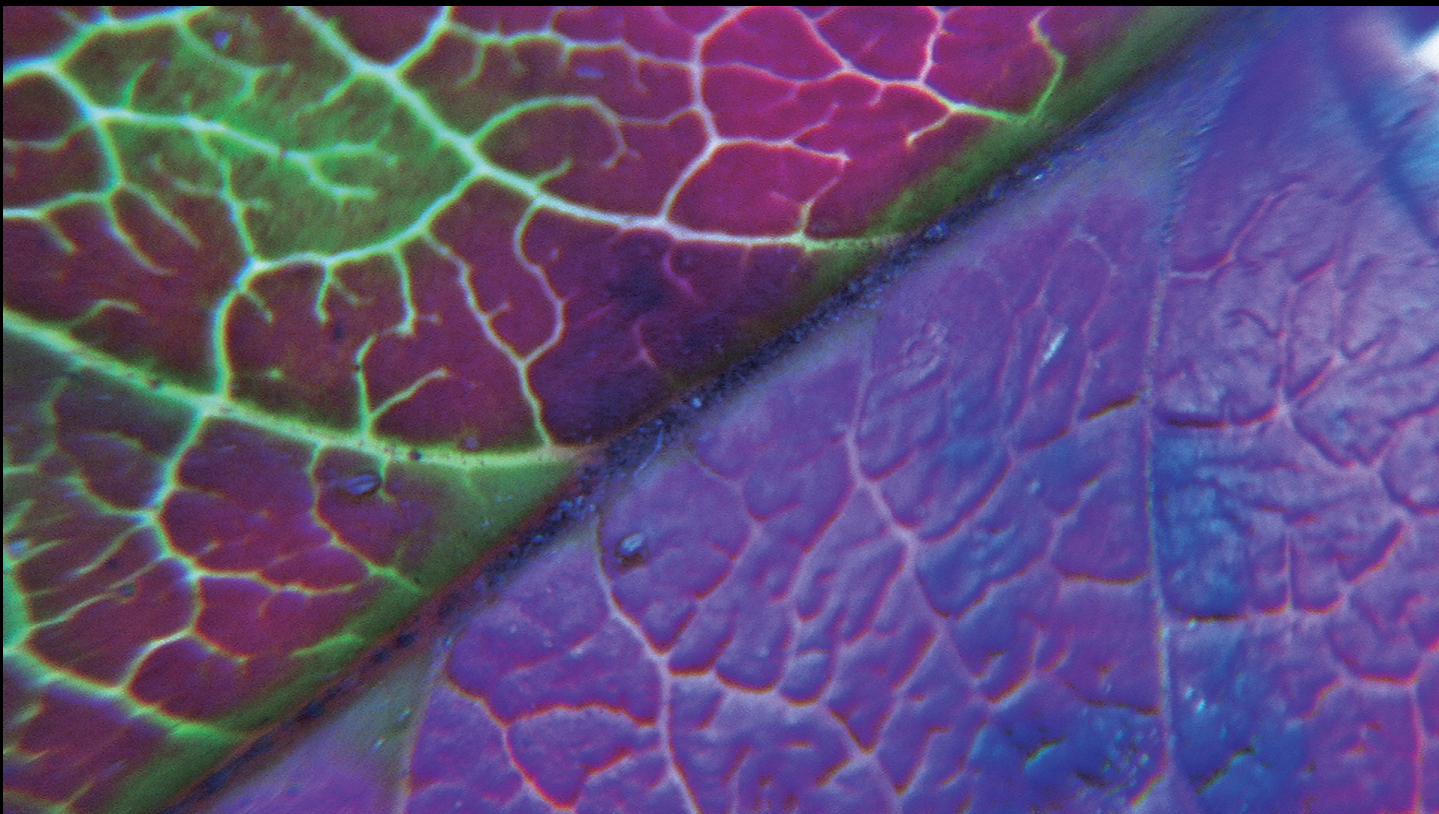
If Nehalem Bay (or almost any other bay on the Oregon Coast) served as the place that Drake – as his ship was being refitted and he was trading amicably with the locals – briefly considered the grand canvas for a New New England, his glorious plans were probably Doomed from the start. The natural geography of the coast is one that has always pushed explorers away from it, or wrecked them in it, or flung them from it. The rivers erupt like firehoses after their descents from the Coast Range and with no delta systems to slow them; the headlands come down to slice the beaches periodically like police barriers; the mountains themselves are slime and brush-choked, vertical and craggy. It is as if the place doesn't want to be easily explored.

The only resolution seems to be an irresistible enigma: a colony that might have been, and the Unknown and unknowable things that may or may not be here somewhere.

For an explorer, the role of memory is bound intimately to an understanding of place. Arriving at a dead end, the explorer has to decide how far back to go to get back on the right track, where the misstep may have been taken.

The way Sacagawea has been treated by historians – what always happens when your future personal history is written by your conquerors, especially if you're female – is based on a lack of tangible contributions she made to future American expansion and industry, and often ignores her role as an explorer. In many ways she is treated the way many female historical





figures are treated by male historians: one of them writing in the latter half of the Twentieth Century even belittles this uneducated Great Plains squaw for her lack of knowledge of the Chinook language.

Only those conversations recorded by members of the expedition and preserved for posterity are extant for us. What happened in the hushed hours of the midnight watches or what thoughts were expressed in the muffled gropings of members of the corps themselves – undoubtedly the two captains, at least once or twice – with Indian maidens (or one another) in those same hours. Rather than the true texture of the days and nights of the journey – no matter how skillfully rendered – all

we are left with is a charcoal rubbing of the real thing.

What happened in those quiet hours, and what desires were expressed? Which regrets? History is sorely left wanting here, making imagination King.

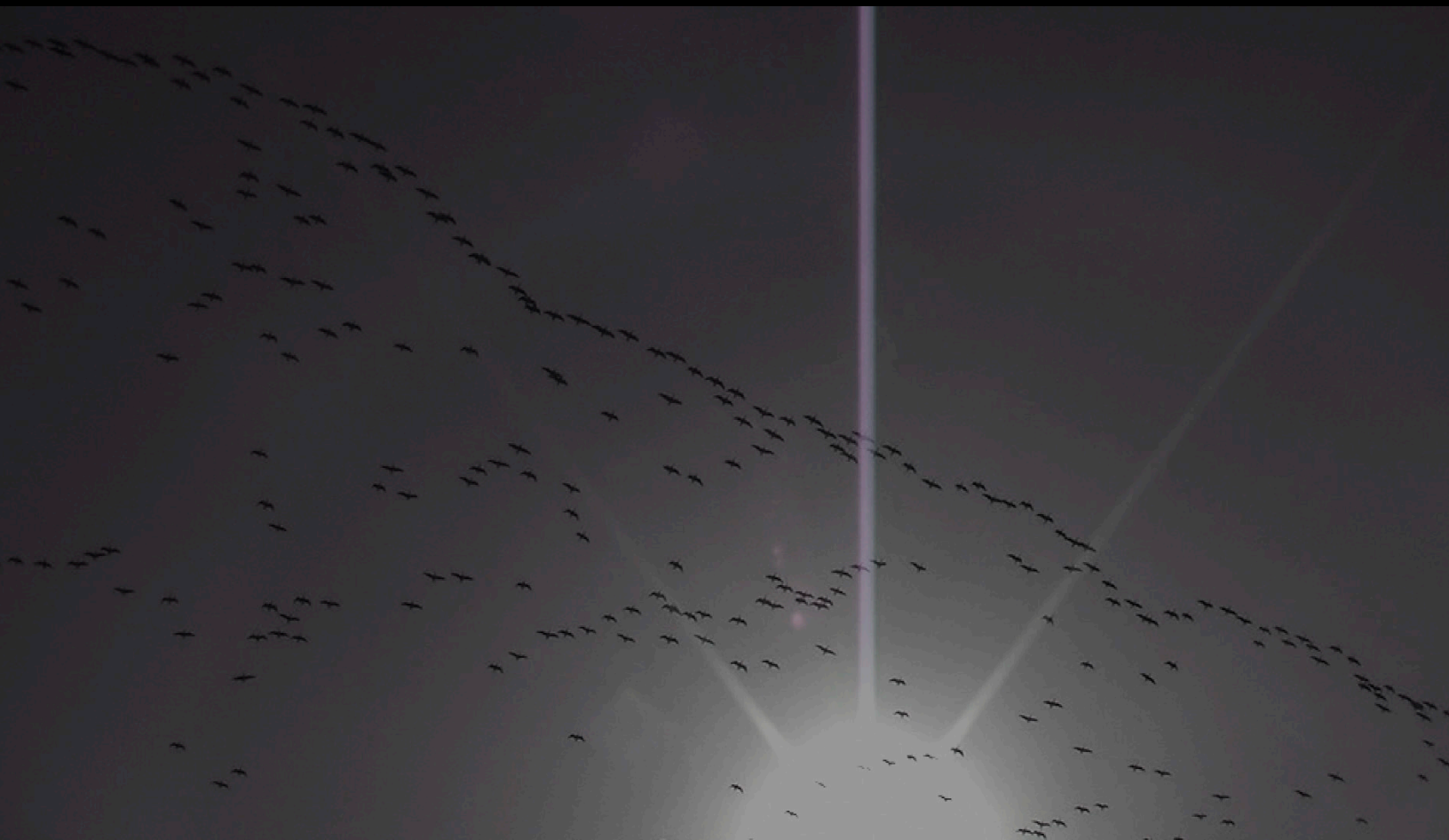
When visiting the Indians of the Northwest, Lewis and Clark were staring directly into the future. The moral decay that they felt they saw all around them – to say nothing of the *physical* decay, evidence for which they noted in their journals but whose impact had not yet become endemic – would become the decay that would eat into the Western tribes in the years to come, a can-

cer. It is interesting that they only saw it upon arriving at the coast, the prophesied pot of gold at the end of the Western rainbow, a coming horror glimpsed at its manifestly destined beginnings: Doom.

Another sign that the Indians had already been affected by white traders is illustrated by what Lewis and Clark saw as the natives' stinginess. When they traded with the first white men they encountered, the Indians

were more than happy to part with the articles they considered mundane in their naiveté – things like sea otter pelts – for what the white men offered – what they must have assumed was valuable.

By the time they arrived at the coast, the explorers were no longer parting with furs for mere trinkets, the Indians having discovered in the meantime that the white men's trinkets were worthless. The Americans took advantage of the Indians' ignorance from the very first





handshakes.

Jefferson bought as many books about the New World as he could find while traveling in Europe – taking knowledge about the New World from what had been accumulated in the Old, then relying on firsthand (or nearby secondhand) personal experience to fill in the gaps, and the maps.

As early as 1782 he was asking acquaintances in their travels beyond the Appalachians to report to him if they discovered any useful information on “animals, vegetables, minerals, or other curious things, notes as to Indians, information of the country between the Mississippi and waters of the South Sea.”

It seems to have been habitual. He was always seeking information from those who traveled, so insatiable was his thirst for knowledge (and between creating a new nation and then ruling it, so little time could he find to do it himself; but then, issuing commands to slaves

must have taken up some of his time). He was insatiable for knowledge, but given the fact that his slaves freed him from manual labor – or any need to make money to feed his family – maybe he should have accomplished more.*

Notwithstanding his armchair explorer’s viewpoint, Jefferson as a subject for history is always entertaining, at least. In his writings he misspells a key word, and I wonder if it isn’t intentional: “knolege.”

I love to study history – all periods and places – but I especially love ancient history, and even moreso pre-history: the earlier the better. The reason is that ancient history is an enormous, incomplete and therefore incompletable puzzle, the mass of it consisting of en-

* Footnote: I am a little unimpressed by his delegating the actual adventuring to others, but perhaps this is an uncharitable view of a man who did so much to make my own travels across the same land possible.



smoke of Alexandria. Possibly it is best that we don't even know what was lost.

The effect of the paucity of information about the ancient world is like the way light is funneled to a pinpoint inside the digital innards of my camera, an enclosed box in which all is dark but a tiny pinhole, through which I am meant to see (and make sense of) most of the human story. The result is the same as in my camera – I cannot capture it all in the frame so I must work with what little I have, and the edges are indistinct. Even the digital sensor serves as a metaphor, as in low-light conditions individual photons bouncing on its surface blow themselves out

ting clues that lead only to other things, other great people who have been left behind by time, neglect, and the accidents of history itself. The ancient world is the greater bulk of human history, about which perhaps only about five percent of all that has been written still exists for us to read. That is, ninety-five percent of human history consists purely of rumor and speculation. We don't even know our own history.

This is unfortunate, but also perhaps necessary. Along with the great poems and works of drama, with histories and scientific treatises, and with stories and fables, much too of misery and hate must have gone up in the

of proportion, introducing an unavoidable haze to what makes it through, as if to suggest that even this can't be trusted.

Ancient history is the most Fun for exactly the same reason that rumors and speculation are always Fun – it is the biggest thrill to imagine The Unknown.

As long as long-dead royal cartographers are going to take wild liberties with their geographies, I might as well have a go at it. My theory is that there really is

a pyramidal height-of-land in the mountainous American West, but it drains people, not rainwater.

Like water, some people also run downhill to the oceans. We are drawn to water like sponges, and we soak it up just as thirstily. My own aquatic affliction I'm sure owes something to the baking, dust-dry heat of the Arizona deserts I've long since fled: I'm afraid I'll shrivel up if I dare go back, like a banana slug on noon asphalt.

The need to be near water manifests itself in strange overtones in travel itineraries. My eye when examining maps is subconsciously drawn to the blue spaces; it follows the chaotic lines of mountain streams where they become rivers and meet one another; it locks onto the shorelines of lakes, even on two-dimensional rags of misfolded paper yanked hastily from a glovebox.

LOST IN THE WANDERING DUNES

The Tillamook told a story wherein a member of the tribe died and the whole village prayed and danced around the corpse for five days in mourning. When he woke (the miracle of resurrection seems not to have been a big deal to them) he explained that after death a person has to travel a long while through a vast Unknown wilderness alone.

In this wilderness, bad people – those undeserving of paradise – keep taking wrong turns. Rather than retiring to a beautiful valley of souls in which they exist in

a state of perpetual youth, they end up in a place where they might be enslaved, or thrown into a fire in which they are held by unseen hands.

I love to wander off into the wilderness, in a real physical sense as much as a metaphorical one. To be honest, I like to be lost. My knowledge of a place becomes less clear even as it becomes more intimate. Imprinted on it are my immediate experiences: the landmarks of early morning are first promising beacons on the horizon that turn to hideous specters with the panicked quality of recurrent nightmares, tedium personified in a sudden blast of wind and rain in the afternoon, and then revert to Naturally holy places in the sublime exhaustion of evening. The very character of the place changes around me, over time.

Dunes rise and fall away on their own, and come and go in their own times. They are nothing but shifting bits of rock and shells, but in their possibilities for Fun they attract like magnets. They ask no permission to travel, file no plans. They start and stop when they please and go where they want.

New forests are born in places where water consistently pools, as first grasses begin to sprout, and then weeds, shrubs, and eventually trees. A new forest is born in a slow accumulation of humus, the birth always gradual.

There is slow death too, as when a wandering dune begins to consume a forest, the trees on the Edge buried first up to their initial set of branches, and then limb after limb disappearing into the dune as it advances until only a few dead twigs sticking from its top mark its final grave (where it has always been, of course), the exact spot where it was buried alive.



In the middle of the dunes it is impossible to tell what has changed except in relation to something recognizable that existed before (and is now half-gone too). I'm always surprised by what manages to find the refuges on the Edges, the places that are slowest to change. These are the features that endure.

Over the long term, the shifts in geography result in shifts in the places occupied in the mind, old memories

wiped out, new ones built in the once-suspended space where the top of a dune rises – perhaps the sand has never shifted quite this way in human history before, perhaps I'm the first person to occupy this particular spot in the lower atmosphere.

At a certain age near the onset of puberty, Indian children would seek the remotest places far from human

activity – the tops of mountains or the depths of dark woods. They spent days in these places, watching and waiting for their guardian spirits to arrive.* I wonder if this ritual doesn't serve many of the needs often filled by meditation – silence and surrender to the purely sensual, minds emptied of the clutter of other's voices.

Vision quests were also performed sometimes later in life, such as when a young man wanted to seek special shamanistic powers to become a medicine man. In other words, the Indians seemed to see value in the exercise *throughout* a person's life, not only when young. Adult versions frequently involved hallucinogens or other mind-altering substances, but in other cases the visions appear to have resulted from nothing but the psychological effort.

Many children these days have to be manually disconnected from the noise – cell phones confiscated, headphones removed – kicking and screaming as a prelude to potential enlightenment. Yet it seems to work more often than one might think, and what is enlightenment without a little effort?

The Indian lifestyle in many ways must have been like this – each generation has to learn the animal trails for themselves, and the trails shift. What were they looking for – and apparently discovering – that is now lost?

Ways of life require adherents to become vibrant within society (as opposed to those discovered or practiced by individuals, who can only ever be examples). If the philosophical underpinnings of a lifestyle come loose

– as surely happened to Indian societies – the lifestyle itself is endangered, and all of its grains of truth are swept away with it.

I pick a clear, full-moon night and a dune discovered earlier, in the daylight. The night coincides with a meteor shower which, in spite of the light of the moon, will be visible as a series of brief flickers at the edges of vision, mere suggestions like the wind devils. I have fallen asleep and awakened at two in the morning for maximum effect, a half-pot of coffee in a thermos and here I am.

The moon tugs at the Pacific gravitationally, the way a toddler lingers at the hem of his mother's skirt, and even from two miles away the ocean sounds the way I imagine war zones sounding, uninterrupted thunder punctuated by the enormous earth-quaking explosions caused when a massive wave plunges along its entire line all at once, collapsing on itself like a pair of spent lovers. These noises are created by Nothing but the ocean being itself, simply existing.

I run because I have recently discovered that I still can, and I leap from the placid face of the dune over and over because it is there to be jumped from, and each time my stomach contents go weightless and I crash with bared feet into a pillow of sand made light blue by the sky, and each feels to me like a signal triumph: minor celebrations upon first sighting, after four long years, what I hope will be a place to at last stop, the very End of The Road itself:

O, the Joy indeed!

It is a warm windless night and I have brought my

* Footnote: There is a catch-twenty-two involved here. If a person happened to have a vision quest in which he or she saw a pileated woodpecker as a guardian spirit, he or she would never be able to kill a pileated woodpecker ever again, a source of wealth and therefore power forever again denied them.

sleeping bag. I light a fire from stray bits of driftwood gathered along the trail and in the still air the smoke pours into the depressions in the dunes, first to one side and then to another. I follow it as it wafts. I remember the directions from the Edge of the fire and I can see in smoke made purple by the moon the course of the night's random mood shifts, moments that roll smoothly out of my life and evaporate into the whole.

I fall asleep in the dunes as the stars twinkle out above me in the glow of pre-dawn. Atop a four-hundred foot dune I am safe from every threat except meteorites – even from tsunamis.

I am safe and lost in the wandering dunes.



“3 Indians arrive in a Conoe. they brought with them mats, roots & Sackocome berries to Sell for which they asked Such high prices that we did not purchase any of them. Those people ask generally double and tribble the value of what they have to Sell, and never take less than the real value of the article in Such things as is calculated to do them Service.”

– William Clark



ROCK LIFE

The first time I drive through the little fishing village of Charleston on the South Coast the tableau is obscured in thick banks of fog, the tops of the boats like minarets in the tiny bay, the slowly-blinking lights of the drawbridge like intermittent revelations of a new (or very old) religion.

I chat with fishermen at the corner market, sit on a bench and watch the dockside moments go sluggishly

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– comfortably sluggishly – by. The drawbridge is a concession to localist sentiment; it is a very small town and only very small boats go through, and the highway is not 101 – it dead ends a few miles further down the road, after winding briefly through Sunset Bay State Park and its “pocket harbor,” which is protected from the stormy Pacific by a set of cliffs on either side of the inlet. It is a favorite park for surfers who prefer to stand on their boards and paddle around, as if they



were stand-up kayaks.

Here the beach becomes quite slopey and slushy, causing waves to break fiercely at one's feet – not the easiest beaches to explore, but some of the most rewarding for the effort. Rope ladders dangle from houses on the cliffs down to the beach, artificial vines of ivy. It was on a beach like this in San Diego that I was first caught by a rising tide – I had been too busy exploring to pay attention to the time, got trapped in a cove, and had to walk a few miles to my hotel in soaked blue jeans after a precarious escape.

Charleston and its environs is another place that seems unconnected to everything else, except in dreams. In my dreams, I can jump to Sunset Bay whenever I want, wherever I am.

I watch for gray and blue whales atop Cape Arago, a hit-or-miss affair on the best days, but the scenery makes all the waiting and squinting worthwhile. Down the beach to the south I see the rugged drama of Seven Devils, an area so named for the numerous headlands that aggravated whites wishing to travel by wagon before a road was carved through them.



When they are present, the whales unleash wispy geysers and an odd tail or two, and from a high vantage their bodies become visible as big dark blobs, underwater shadows, as from an airplane. The scales of the sizes involved – both of the creatures and of their migrations – is weirdly comforting, rhythms that proceed – without human interference in these waters, except among some indigenous peoples who are allowed to hunt the whales for subsistence – whether I am watching them or not. I am utterly irrelevant to them and the fact is Zenlike in its realization, as Nature often is.

The local chapter of the Preteen Gangstas conduct initiations and hazing ceremonies for new inductees outside my trailer – shrill giggles and shrieks at the expense of everyone else until my elderly neighbor shoos them off his picnic table. They flip him off as they leave.

“Shouldn’t school be starting soon?” I ask my cats, who have no reply.

I might as well admit this here as anywhere: I have been subconsciously in love with Linda Ronstadt since she hosted *The Muppet Show* in 1980. I figured it out late one recent night while watching it on repeat after stumbling across it for the first time since it aired, watching it on repeat about a dozen times, volume up.

She destroys me every time with her version of “Blue Bayou” – also famously recorded by Roy Orbison, who is equally destructive with his voice – not least since she has evidently been my ideal of feminine sexuality since I was six (along with Miss Piggy, naturally, a less-than-shocking revelation somehow), and is accompanied in the song by a rock band consisting of nothing but rubberized felt made to appear to sing by the human hands inside of them. A literal chorus of swamp frogs accom-

panies her, too, as background croakers.

Even though Linda is no longer *that* Linda and I am no longer six (and the puppets around us haven’t aged a day), if for some reason I was forced to spend eternity in a single televised moment, the fates might choose for me this one, as reward or punishment, I’m not sure.*

* Footnote: The episode also features one of those Classic Muppet songs – “I’m So Happy,” in which a practically moribund, cobweb-bound puppet in a bowler advises us “Why don’t you be happy too?” – that here and Now in 2012 has perhaps finally found its cultural Home (even if its use of the term “gay” illuminates a temporal verbal disconnect, perhaps unintentionally hilariously so).



When I have any difficulty at all getting to sleep, I wait for an earthquake to happen. I am alert and sensitive to the slightest little tremor that might be the beginning of The Big One, and imagine how weird it would be if it actually happened while I am thinking about it. Waiting is inherently boring – I just listen to my breathing and wait – and here (and in other places) it's a significant statistical possibility. I'm usually asleep within about three minutes. It is the boredom of waiting and the non-event, the non-existence (so far) of the earthquake. The Nothingness is a Bhuddist one, the sound of zero hands clapping.

I've heard it often enough to say it is simply a thing that happens a lot – has probably happened since before humans were even humans: when a group of girls gets together in a campground, a screaming match often follows. They sound like shrill songbirds testing one another's songs: they all scream at once, then each girl presumably takes a turn (the screams are staggered and are performed solo). Such screaming matches can (and do) last up to an hour. Boys rarely limit their competitions to such nonsense, although I have seen punching matches, rock-throwing skirmishes, feats of urination and the like.

The laughter of other campers and the song of the Swainson's thrush are similar. I recognize the laughter of a specific camper when I hear it here and there over the course of a few days in the same way I hear the thrush's upscale, downscale song and become familiar with its peculiarities – the way it cuts out at the high end for a specific bird and breaks low for another. The voices of others, if one makes no effort to comprehend the meanings of the words and listens only to the sound of the screams and shouts – the whispers and steady rhythms of a conversation on low boil – can be appre-

ciated merely on those terms, as mere emanations of Nature. These after all are the natural exclamations of human animals.

Some campers have especially unique laughs. One week a family camps somewhere nearby in the campground – I never quite figure out where exactly, as it seems to be all over the place – and I am surprised several times throughout each day, all week long, by the laughter of a boy who sounds exactly like Ralphie's little brother from the movie *A Christmas Story*, but funnier. It is like a woodchuck chorus on lithium as conducted by Joe Cocker, the most effervescent noise I think I have ever heard coming from human vocal chords. I smile all the time now, just remembering it.

I am somewhat jealous of his parents, classmates, and siblings, who don't have to remember at all.

A chain-bark strikes the campground dogs. A group of malcontents raises the pitch to a warbling howl, and it is like Greek fire; from all directions ears perk and tails twitch, and the inner wolves awaken.

People leave their dogs staked in the grass of their campsites for a few hours while they go to the beach – the poor dogs sit and whine pitifully as if in torture. But the torture is mine. I close my windows, pop in earplugs, and still the piercing howls reach me. When the family at last bumbles back, the dog yips with delight, licks the faces of children, all is forgiven because revenge is impossible.

In the morning an impromptu parade passes casually through my loop of the campground – a Model T road-

ster, shiny black with a rumble seat, followed by kids on bikes with training wheels, children sprinting, rollerblading couples and trotting dogs, all trying to see the antique Ford, following it. I hear a chorus of oohs and ahhs and children shouting as it rumbles through the campground. “Do they still make cars like that?” I hear one ask. It might as well be a spaceship. The klaxon horn sounds as it rolls out of earshot at last, a nostalgic goodbye.

In the evening, a kid rides through a crowded campground on rollerblades as I follow the progress aurally: “Sorry!” “Sorry!” “Oops, sorry!” It fades and weakens into the smoky distance.

A RACHNOSUICIDE

I am in a campground set deep in the forest, among the tall trees. A babbling brook dribbles through the back of my site like the sunlight that slices into the valley directly from the ocean, lighting up the mossy sides of the old-growth giants, and I am lying flat on my back, looking up – treetops inverted, clouds floating by. I’m throwing baseballs to myself, steep parabolic arcs more or less vertical, solid thuds into the netting (if I’m lucky) of my baseball mitt.

The upside-down tops of the trees extend away from me, framing my window onto the open sky. Well-rounded, wispy clouds migrate above me – low clouds moving south, high clouds lazily drifting northward,

periodic middle layers appearing to swirl, birds in high-altitude flight eclipsing planes that leave contrails that slowly dissipate as they pass in review, along with passing colonies of spores and bugs. It is like looking at an infinity inside a box. We will get a rare thunderstorm tonight, after sunset.

There is more going on up there than is usually evident. The treetops must be studied before the abundance of life becomes lucid – ferns and even a few grasses become distinguishable from the mosses and lichens, and the flight tendencies of birds are made obvious.

Idly I speculate on the number of campfires I must have started during all of my months camping. I feel like a professional camper, which in a way I am. At the moment I don’t know that I am still only about halfway through my exploration; I’ve passed this way a few times before – I’ve already traversed the whole coast twice – but just now I am in the center of it, squarely in the center of the whole thing and I am unaware of it.

The sweet reek of cannabis floats downstream with the creek along with the overripe cedar my neighbors are burning. Each log dropped into the fire crackles demonically, stray pops of knots of wood explode, and I realize I’ve reached a perfect camping moment. If I were to explain camping to aliens – I watch for them beyond the tip of my outfielder’s glove while the ball is in the air, unlikely as it seems – I would describe this. At sunset I will begin watching for the slow wobbly transits of satellites and simply pretend they are spaceships, which they are.*

* Footnote: The realization that I live in a time of spaceships is an idle rumination that although I’ve known it all my life astonishes me for the first time – *spaceships!*

It is in such rare atmospheres that their opposites – those of consumer society and mass culture – at last fail. There are no products here, and aside from the markings on my baseball glove and off-brand baseballs – I bought them at a dollar store, four of them so that I only have to collect the mis-throws (there are many) a quarter as often – there are no logos.

The only consumption occurring here is that of dead, dry wood in flames and my neighbor's equally unbranded marijuana, also in flames. Little of this can be offered in any store, yet it is a perfect moment, a naturally occurring perfection.

This is what products are meant to offer but never do. This too may be why rich people don't seem to be as happy as consumerist logic suggests they ought. Here is where the family whose patriarch was by outward appearances descending into madness should have brought him – to the soft hum to be discovered within the spontaneous harmonics of a natural chord, the sweet reverberations of Natural Time. Here is the pace he should be seeking.

The weed smoke may have chilled him out a bit, but I

imagine he would have called the police instead. Small steps must be taken before larger ones can be successfully attempted. If he is an important CEO as I imagine him, here is a bottom line he can appreciate: a change in attitude must occur. He has to be willing to open his eyes even when the light is too bright, and question his own understanding of the things the universe is really asking of him: to do this, he must ask how it works.

Yet I doubt he will.

Here a tense expression is so out of place that it cannot last; it would evaporate into the all-muffling peace. Here I can calibrate my internal clock, to be sure it is accurate – the way seamen used to synchronize their chronometers by the sun, moon, and stars. Here is the cradle of life, and it surrounds and warms me as a cradle should.

It is a waste of time, what I have been doing. I'm flagrantly wasting time. Some would say I should be arrested for it; I say they need to relax more.

Ultimately, I waste time here because I want to be sure that never again will I find myself without time to waste. Life is short enough, the tick-tock of the giant clock too loud and incessant. I draw a line in the sand, here in the center of it all.

I choose to set my own clock by the rhythms of Nature and not to mess with it again, to keep it ticking off the proper segments of my life. I will go slow, as slowly as I want.

The ball thuds again into the netting of my





mitt, and over its outstretched edge I see something I'm not expecting. It is as phantasmagorical as a stray snowflake on an otherwise clear day – the only means by which its presence is suspected is as a flutter in the eye, a brief sparkle against the dark tones of the forest: a spider's gossamer strand is dropping toward me, twisting and tossing in the breeze.

I look to see what is at the end of the string just as the spider lands squarely in the center of the hottest part of my campfire. It takes a step or two before it is thrown onto its back by the intense heat – its legs begin to evaporate before the rest of it, and the involuntary nervous reactions knock the spider over – before it shrivels to a tiny pile of ash.

It is a perfect Rock death.

There is, in the span of a human lifetime, an infinite number of things to look at, and an infinite number of discoveries to be made. This is the calculus of Nature. It always ends in infinity.

It is an unusual coincidence, a thing that probably occurs all the time but goes unnoticed – spiders have been committing suicides from treetops into firepits for thousands of years. It is not that the occurrence itself is unusual, but the opposite: for that moment at least, my mind was still enough and aware enough to notice it. The neighborly marijuana smoke may have played a role, but I believe my willingness to look – to take my eyes off the ball even as it is in midair – made me more observant and apt therefore to discover more

of these things, the minor glories of Nature.

The cycle of investigation and understanding may at first glance make the realm of Nature seem infinite, which over the extreme long-term it is. Each species tells a story of life on Earth – one way to survive. Each has a particular evolutionary history that speaks volumes about what it is to be alive in this time and place, specific accounts of life on Earth. With each extinction, this knowledge is lost forever.

Every species of plant or animal is always at least one thing: an example of how to live, an example of how to survive and propagate through time over generations that each must do the math the hard way. The behavior is encoded in the DNA, but in the physical world of the here and Now it is always just an example, and not of an animal or a plant in a book, but of a lifestyle. Species are merely lifestyles that always work.

Moreover, each species is unique. While they may share common ancestry, the stories of each are utterly unique in the universe starting at the point from which they diverged from that ancestor.

Each species works and is unique. The non-functional, unoriginal lifestyle is a purely human discovery.

Postscript: There are other such Natural Rock deaths. Sometimes slugs climb trees, lose their grip and fall with a splat onto dry asphalt, on which their bodies fry as in a skillet, misadventuring mollusks. In summer, the slime they leave behind will last longer than their bodies, which will turn brown and flat and eventually flake off onto shoes or tires; the slime, in the absence of rain for weeks at a time, will glisten and catch the eyes of hikers and drivers every time they pass over,

like chalk outlines.

I once discover a flying ant apparently wedged into the mouth of a spider who – too impatient to spin it in a cocoon of webbing in order to suck out its juices – has apparently tried to swallow it whole, or else the ant's mouth parts got lodged in its own, like teenagers kissing with new braces. An apt metaphor for gluttony, I find the conjoined pair on the edge of an orchid in full bloom near a dumpster behind a convenience store.

Then there was the spider on the salmonberry. Had it been poisonous we might have had twin Rock deaths – two for the price of one. Fortunately I spat it out when I felt it wriggling on my tongue and it crawled away, apparently unhurt but missing two of its legs, which I later found.

BACKYARD WARS AGAINST NATURE

In their earliest days my father's gardens were more scientific laboratory than Zen paradise. I imagine what it must have felt like to him when he dropped the first seed into the first plot of land that belonged to him – the son of a preacher and a farmer, I imagine him falling to his knees and saying a quick prayer before leaning slightly forward to begin the work of the soil.

His early gardens would have been choked with meticulously tended vegetables by their first July, but quickly thereafter would have started to morph into a heterogeneous field of exotic freaks. He would have been planting things nonnative to the Midwest – bore-

dom would have pushed him rather immediately toward experimentation.*

It was only later, after he had run through exotic flowers, cacti, palms and ferns, fungi, and fruit, that he would have sought beauty. He was attracted by the austere quietude of Japanese gardens, going so far as to stock the main pond on his property – a swimming pond that freezes to a hockey rink during Indiana winters – with both koi and goldfish, having first exterminated all other species with fish poison.

It was only after he had been actively seeking aesthetic beauty in his amateur garden designs for several years that he began to seek also a harmony with Nature as well, the harmony itself then becoming the source of the beauty, in his eyes. That is, first he was interested intellectually in Nature, as a scientific interest in accord with his surgeon's perspective on the world, before he began to look for beauty, which finding he began to harmonize with.

His garden designs evolved to a point at which it seems to me he was more interested in encouraging Nature to do its thing in the direction he wanted rather than trying to control its effects directly. Fields that flooded every spring were seeded with aquaphilic species, and clumps of beachgrass like those found here were allowed to run as free as hippy hair after an unfortunate incident with a lawnmower, when he attempted to chop

* Footnote: His interest in exotic species was never limited strictly to botanical ones. The backyard in which I grew up was patrolled by a flock of peacocks – the clatter of their grabby feet scraping pebbles from the shingles of the roof of our house, one of my earliest sense memories – for a summer or two, before they mysteriously disappeared one day while I was at school. Also, he nurtured weird aquarium fish, ducks with odd balls of feather-flesh growing on the tops of their heads like the balls on the tops of wool caps, and assorted strange chickens.

one down and ended up losing a toe. I remember now that he told me he was furious with himself – while at the same time laughing off the incident, making him my model of manliness for a while afterward – because in his haste to finish the mowing job he had been trying to go too fast and hadn't been concentrating on the task.

Maybe this was his turning point.

The harmony indicated a new level of sophistication in his hobbyism, something few people noticed, but I did, and I remember it.

By the End of his life, I think he found what he had been seeking. The last time I saw him, two weeks before he died, he took me on a quick tour of his last garden, his grand finale. Even in the depths of winter it made my heart hurt – glittery cut-glass icicles dangled from the sad droop of bald cypress trees, old snow melted on peeled-paint benches, wind-worn thickets of snapped and toppled cattails across the chocolate-brown water, all underneath death-gray skies: a day made only for saying goodbye.

Huts are first constructed on the beaches either by the bored and foresighted or by someone who has grown sick of the howling winds and wants only a place to stop.

These are decidedly one-sided structures, all the wood piled to one side to block the wind de jour. Then the structure is repeatedly repurposed by those who stumble across it when the original architect is long-gone. The drift logs are thrown to the other side when the wind shifts – when a cold front draws Arctic air from



the north to counter the previous week's prevailing southwesterlies, for instance – and what was once the back becomes the front; but the structure is never fully enclosed and always ends up open to at least one side.

I am wheezing through a fierce summer windstorm with my eyes locked onto an imposing complex of logs and whatnot up the beach. After the Fourth of July weekend the beach is peppered with small structures, but this is the granddaddy. I sit gratefully for a while within – it is always rewarding to find free shelter in a storm – until I notice the care with which this hut compound has been laid out: blown over by the wind, a little knickknack shelf still half-holds its disarranged pieces – the backbone of a fish, part of a sea sponge, a root beer can and a light green chunk of styrofoam.

The torso of a white plastic lawn chair has been tied spread-eagled to a pole, a hostage or disobedient soldier being disciplined. A hand-lettered sign on the most battered piece of plywood I've ever seen is propped on one wall:

FORT AWESOME*

* Footnote: "Awesome" is a term that first gained frequency – as an alternative for "cool," a word made generic from overuse from the '50s to the present – in the 1980s, as I remember it. It dawned on the American cultural psyche – and was used along with the term "wacky" to sell every product under the sun – at about the same time Michael Jackson was conquering new Pop ground and buying it up as quickly as possible. "Awesome" has proved to be surprisingly durable, "wacky" not so much, although still popular among the under-eight crowd when pandering is needed. Genuine gangstas are more likely to use the related term "wack" than "awesome" any day.

Many “forts” are simply local beach logs that have been stacked haphazardly in the urgency of a squall and then improved – becoming rapidly more complex but also more utilitarian (the open side of these invariably lie toward dry land) – or slowly picked apart by the elements to dissolve again into a jumble of logs.

The most protective improvement is a roof made of flat planks that are not only set atop the structural skeleton but anchored by a log thrown over the top of them, on the outside. These perhaps unwittingly demonstrate an Indian practice whereby the roofs of longhouses were prevented from being ripped free by an upgust.

The Siuslaw tribe went further, first digging a square pit into the earth – ladders were often needed to descend into the structures – and piling the excavated earth above the wooden roof to create an absorbent layer that also acted as an insulator. Even with beds constructed on stilts, though, it is difficult to imagine just how they kept the pervasive moisture out of their bedrooms (when my trailer, even propped above the puddles on tires and jacks, is as about as waterproof in a long winter storm as a whiffleball).

Having stripped beached whales of their blubber, coast Indians in need of home furnishings sometimes dragged a vertebra or two Home with them as well, to



use as stools around the cooking fire.

Clark describes the houses of the Siuslaw thusly: “These houses are commonly Sunk to the debth of 4 or 5 feet in which Case the eve of the house comes nearly to the Surface of the earth. in the Center of each room a Space of from 6 by 8 feet is Sunk about 12 inches lower than the Hoar having its Sides Secured by four thick boards or Squar pieces of timber, in this Space they make their fire, their fuel being generally dry pine Split Small which they perform with a peice of an Elks horn Sharpened at one end drove into the wood with a Stone.”

In September of 1850, the Oregon legislature passed a law that promised three-hundred and twenty acres of land free of charge to any (white) settler over the age of eighteen who was in the state by the end of the following year. The deadline was later extended by four years. Only seventy-five hundred pioneers took the government up on the offer – there was no shortage of land in the middle of the Nineteenth Century American West – but it spelled the end for Indian tribes who, despite having signed no treaties ceding their land, were kicked out of their ancestral villages. The villages often occupied the only cleared, level land along a waterway; when a settler claimed the land, the Indians who had been living there for generations were suddenly illegal squatters.

Other atrocities of the New World involved imperial European invaders slaughtering Indians or Indians massacring Europeans (or, in the case of Haiti at least, of slaves rebelling against their European masters and winning for themselves independence). In Oregon, the story is purely a local one, the atrocities neatly home-brewed. Miners, trappers, and lumbermen seem to have played the most vocal role, literally, in agitating the bands of settlers to organize and capture and lynch Indians. The Indians were disruptive and uncooperative – bad for business. They had to go.

There are accounts of such men riding through white villages if Indians attempted to pass through, whipping the settlers into impromptu lynch mobs that must have been similar to the way that young black men were lynched in the American South in the first half of the last century.

They called themselves volunteer soldiers but lacked military discipline entirely.* One volunteer company, the Crescent City Guard, were a band of miners who came north to fight Indians and were quite clear about what they wanted. Their homemade battle flag had one word in bright bold letters on a dark background:

EXTERMINATION!

In the midst of the turmoil, in 1853, pioneer John Bee-

* Footnote: US Army officers were contemptuous of the Oregon Volunteers – they had been sent to forts in the area in part in order to protect the Indians – but when the Indians responded by attacking settlers, the army's purpose was changed. US presidents of the era would win no votes siding with Indians. The army was in essence forced to help the miners as allies in their atrocities, but this is a hard excuse.

son – an Englishman who had witnessed atrocities committed by settlers against Indians on The Oregon Trail – arose as the subject in a meeting of settlers in Jacksonville. The topic at hand was the extermination program urged by the miners and Beeson was known to be soft on the issue. He was judged by neighbors in backrooms and found to be nothing but a nuisance.

That night he fled from the Rogue River Valley in fear for his life; the last of the conscientious objectors was gone, and the extermination plan went into action. Beeson later wrote a book, *A Plea for the Indians of Oregon*, published only a few months later which, it turned out, was too late. The Civil War began shortly after Beeson began his campaign for the Indians in earnest, and as so often happens in American history, the Indians became an afterthought; Abraham Lincoln seems to have been especially deaf to the plight of the Indians for a president with his very particular reputation.**

If they resisted they were murdered by small bands of settlers – new neighbors bonding over mini-massacres. Some tribes lost it all – they huddled on beaches in small groups with nowhere to go, because settlers had taken all of the dry ground. They had been pushed all the way to the beach.

On February 22, 1856, a trail of tears began for the few remaining Indians of the Rogue and Umpqua valleys who trod north, a pack of children and grandparents, the middle generation having been decimated. Miners sniped at their backs as they left.

** Footnote: Lincoln's ambivalence toward the Indians may well have been concealing a genuine hostility; his own grandfather had been killed in an Indian raid when Lincoln was a boy.



What followed these events is typical of the Indian story on this continent in general during this period – huge chunks of land swallowed like bites of food, by way of deception, lying, and treaties filled with promises that were never intended to be kept. Where in the rest of the nation the whites wanted the Indians to go west, here they wanted them to go east, to the deserts on the east side of the Cascades, the western side now being taken.

SOME EPOCHS ARE HARDER THAN OTHERS

After a storm, a drive down 101 can be a hard knock to

one's sense of normalcy. There are branches littering the roads and pulled by utility crews into ditches, but it takes a while to recognize the truly disorienting element – an inordinate number of trees have been knocked off-kilter. Everywhere straight trees lean into one another, having been caught in the act of falling.*

Combined with those that have fallen successfully all the way to the ground – they make for odd angles: it is fun to try to replay some of the most spectacular dislocations in the imagination, to see muscular limbs shattering against giant trunks and to diagnose the weird degrees to which smaller neighbors are bent. The effect is like what happens to the inner ear fluid of a spinning toddler – it becomes difficult to distinguish up from down, horizons appear to shift as a result of optical illusions. It is that spruces and lodgepole pines grow so straight that one can see when there is an issue with how they are anchored into the ground. When shore pines get knocked a few degrees off vertical, it is hard to notice.

* Footnote: At the start of one winter a massive fir crashes through one of my favorite sites at a state park in Bandon. Fortunately, the loop is closed and the site is empty. Nonetheless, the image of a two-foot wide tree sprawled across the very center of the parking apron – the top of the tree spilling across three others – gives me plenty of fuel to fire the season's native paranoia.

101 bears many scars of such storms. Land and mudslides undercut it; whole stretches of the southbound lane tumble down cliff faces and into the sea. Most of the big trees along the highway are gone already, but once in a while one of the survivors snaps. The litter of roadside sawdust that is left behind after it is removed from the highway will succumb to the elements too, first colonized by mosses, lichens, and mushrooms (and other miscellaneous categories of plants and fungi), then turning darker shades of brown, going a bit slimy, and decaying into Nothingness.

There is more than one way for a tree to fall over.

The crust of the earth here is like a lumpy pudding. Even small quakes can cause unstable lumps to collapse in on themselves. In a newly collapsed soft spot the spruces and firs remain perfectly straight but are tilted at the same angle, an entire grove thrown about ten degrees off plumb, as if all suddenly convinced that they have been growing in the wrong direction all these years.

After a year or two, the trees that remain viable will gradually curve toward the sun in the same way that smaller plants and shrubs do. What eventually results is a stand of trees with stumps and trees all growing at one angle below and curving in identical arcs to the treetops, above which they are again growing directly against gravity's pull.

Some of the most unstable forest floors probably shift anew with each moderate quake, resulting in small forest areas in which repeated bending, unbending, and rebending of trees has taken place – they demonstrate in their shapes and postures the pages of the geological histories written when the ground shifts beneath their

roots. These are small pockets, like sinkholes or patches of quicksand. They can't be seen until they've been blundered upon.

Some trees sprout from a common underground complex of roots. If the roots die, they all die. If the roots are knocked off-kilter, they all tumble in the same direction.

Shore pines are often knocked over to the point that the branches thrown atop the ground begin to take root. A tree that is horribly traumatized – not long for this world by appearances – can heal itself and colonize new ground in the name of the (locally) endangered species.

After years of this – shattering and reforming like sedimentary rocks, breaking and becoming stronger in the process like muscle tissue – the oldest trees take on the character of the place, reflections of the environment like the overgrown faces of old fishermen. It is as if they are spirits.

One bushy shore pine standing alone in a park median has been split down the middle into four or five parts. The rangers seem to have left it to see if it will recover, as shore pines often do – the branches have broken low to the ground and are partially resting on it. I make a note to check on it the next time I am in the area. I used to sit and read under that pine.

Other trees I have seen bear the telltale bald grass and exposed, shoe-gnawed roots that testify that it was once beloved by children. The saddest of these have been knocked down roots and all, so that the early spring flowers that might have been plucked by children during summer – or, more likely, trampled underfoot in the mad pursuit of Fun, perhaps during a game of tag

(kids still play it) – are still growing vigorously but at a ninety-degree angle to their own roots, having adjusted to the new definition of “up.”

The silver lining is that many of these flowers will live more or less normal, kid-shoe-free lives once they have adjusted to the new realities: the roots have brought plenty of soil with them. Not only this, but possibly their own offspring, shed in autumn onto newly turned earth, will have an even better chance at survival – especially now that the tree is no longer there to draw children.

I am in the campground at Cape Blanco, the westernmost point in Oregon. Moreover, I’m in the westernmost part of the campground and am the only camper; aside from myself and one park host, the campground is completely empty. It is impossible for me to go any further to the west and remain dry, and I can be certain there is no one more westerly within the state than I am – the lighthouse on the cape itself is run by computers and it is a Friday evening, meaning that even the park rangers will be somewhere to the east of me, partying maybe. I am alone.

I am lazing at my computer, thinking things I can no longer remember because they turn out to be irrelevant. The cats have been playing a game of “chase each other around” – some great feline weirdness that doesn’t involve me, so I ignore it – but have Now congealed into a single mass on the bed in the other room, a collective orange, black, and white organism that snoozes these hours away (and frequently snores).

The atmosphere inside the trailer and the trailer itself is calm, everything calm, except I can hear a slight rustle outside my windows, a whispery breeze in the

treetops. When my trailer begins to shimmy, then, I am calm enough to be merely curious about it, but not especially so: maybe one of the cats woke up and tried to re-engage, or a quick gust I *didn’t* hear managed to give the trailer a brief nudge.

I forget about it until I myself am ready to crawl into bed, when on a whim I browse to the United States Geological Service website and check the “Did You Feel It?” page. What I felt turns out to be a magnitude six tremor three hundred kilometers offshore and ten kilometers under the surface, one of the forgettable adjustments the Earth makes all the time to balance itself, a shift that on its own is utterly irrelevant but is cumulatively part of the grand dance of geological forces too powerful to contemplate for long without getting a bit dizzy.

This is *my* earthquake – not the one I’ve been waiting for, but the one that has instead found me, the human closest to it on land. I hope that someday the Geological Service will name the quake after me – The Great J. B. Elhem Earthquake of 2011 – mostly because I like the idea of naming an utterly insignificant earthquake for someone no one has ever heard of, for no reason.

WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

I arrive at my site in torrential rains and will become rained-in over the next few days, pine cones and branches will litter the tops of my slideouts and I will nearly electrocute myself attaching my utility cables in three

inches of standing water.*

A few days later as I am preparing to leave a host asks me what I do for a living. It will be the first time I confess to a stranger that I am working on a book, because I know from past experience the kind of unpleasantness even suggesting literary aspirations usually invites.

“I’m a photographer,” I say, “and I’m trying to write a book.”

The man’s demeanor changes instantly – or not instantly, but only after a brief pause, a moment that reminds me of the Preeteen Gangsta who smiled: I see the thought process in real time – as if I have just told him I am a serial killer, that *that* is what I do for a living.

He grunts, scrutinizes my trailer for a few seconds, scrutinizes me. He begins poking around my trailer, noting trim and weatherstripping that has become frazzled and that I mean to repair one day. He sniffs.

“Well, you have to write what you know,” he tells me. Unasked, he elaborates: “You have to know a lot of stuff to write a book. I tried to write a book once. You have to know a lot of stuff.” With this the topic ends.

Having put me in my place – given an obvious idiot fair warning of his certain failure – he recommends that I clean up my trailer and clear the leaves and branches and pine cones from my slideouts, a task for which he

offers to lend me his leafblower.

“No thanks,” I say. “I need to climb onto my roof to fix other things anyway, so I will just do it then.” He grunts again and wanders Home.

From his lawn chair and with a beagle snoozing at his feet, he waves as I pull out and roll past him on my way toward California, then he turns his head to stare intently at some great Nothing to the left. He gave me his best unasked for advice and waved goodbye – he figures he has done his job as a host, and cares no longer.

I recognize it for what it is: a useful defense mechanism against the truth.

Everyone always goes their own way in The End.

* Footnote: If rain is forecast, it is not a bad idea to check the local topography of the campsite you are considering. Try to figure out where the water will collect and where it will drain, especially if your camping involves sleeping in tents. The trampled ground surrounding firepits tend to flood especially quickly, as they lack the vegetation needed to soak up excess moisture.

“The attack was commenced while it was yet too dark to distinguish one Indian from another, and by this reason it so happened that several squaws and children were killed. None were killed after it became light enough to distinguish between the sexes.”

– Charles Drew, describing a massacre of Indians in the
Rogue River Valley, 1853

“The Sea which is imedeately in front roars like a repeeted roling thunder and have rored in that way ever Since our arrival in its borders which is now 24 Days Since we arrived in Sight of the Great Western Ocian, I cant Say Pasific as Since I have Seen it, it has been the reverse. Elegant Canoes”

– William Clark, December 1, 1805



SEVEN DEVILS

During the summer months, camp hosts drive through the campground loops on golf carts, selling firewood at five dollars a bundle. Many of the hosts attach bells to their carts after the first few weeks of tourist season – I like to imagine so many tourists suggesting them that the hosts cave in and buy them, as they make purchasing firewood very easy. All you have to do is listen for the cheerful, tingling bell.

In the dead of winter a little old lady pulling a little red handcart with two plastic-wrapped bundles of split firewood stops as she passes my site. “Firewood?” she asks me. I like to buy from the hosts when I can because the profits are put directly back into the park. That I am

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one of only three campers this late in the season doesn’t phase the little old lady. “I was going for a walk anyway,” she says. I buy both bundles, to lighten her trip Home.

In the last week in September the air turns nippy, as it does virtually everywhere on the North American continent. The families and the college kids are gone, vanished like sandpipers. For the first time in months the

campground is again less than half full and the sense of loneliness is immediate, the sudden silence shocking. The demographics of the campers change literally overnight – a certain type of camper yearns for the solitude, and the loners all come out at once according



to their nature, only after everyone else has left. At this point the little bell on the golf carts begin to sound like the tolling of mourning bells, and I imagine the camp hosts are out seeking conversations as if seeking an honest man by lamplight (and if there is a more lonely image than this, I don't want to imagine it).

At noon on an August day a lone rumble of thunder resounds weakly but clearly in the lazy, quiet campground. "Yes!" I shout in response to the sound, an involuntary exultation over a weather phenomenon that I sorely miss, then the feeling with the back of my head of stares that descend from neighboring sites. I sheep-

ishly look back down at my book, like a cat, as if nothing has happened.

A couple play fetch with their two dogs, a big chocolate lab and a medium-sized yellow one with a back leg missing. When the ball is thrown the black dog runs after it with a slow, loping, unspeakably goofy joy – it is waiting for its partner to catch up, giving the slower dog a chance. It has adapted to a localized time scale, handicapped itself to match the prevailing common speed limit of Fun.



The Lone Pine stands proudly in a proud spot, alone. It is the only tree on the banks of a slow-rolling river near where it empties into the sea, but this is not what makes it proud. It is because it is fully-actualized as a shore pine, the most perfectly formed sample of its species I have ever discovered. The crooks and jags endemic to shore pines on this coast are absent from the silhouette at a distance, and it is among the tallest I've seen near a beach. Despite having to face the wind head-on, with no sheltering forest nearby to slow the gales that rip up the flat river valley, it has not been contorted by what in winter are about the strongest winds on the coast. The Lone Pine has not been shriveled by wind and fear.

I am alone on a trail at the end of a holiday weekend. Head down in thought, I am watching the trail to avoid squashing giant slugs. I look up to see a boy of about seven or eight zooming toward me down a hill, gaining speed. I see the face immediately because it is in motion directly toward me; framed by a helmet, it beams ear to ear at me, a gigantic flying face, a hail-Mary smiley from out of the blue. Here is a kid out having Fun in Nature, and unlike the Preteen Gangsta who smiled, I discover that *I* am the one surprised this time.

The bodies of four Portuguese fishermen were discovered on a beach near Seaside on April 25, 1865. Locals buried them with a marker:

KNOWN ONLY TO GOD

Men frequently view life as a contest. This initially occurs to them when they realize they have nothing but ramen noodles in the cupboard. Here is where it starts. From this departure it becomes a Darwinian struggle for survival for a while, so fierce and so unwinnable that many quickly convince themselves that they have

to fight, fight, fight all the time, to the bitter End, just to survive.

For some men, the competition comes to take on the luster of glory (and the accompanying torture and humiliation) not unlike the way some of the Preteen Gangstas will get stuck in adolescence: some will fail to make it out. For them, the competition becomes all



there is – no wonder they snap.

Some men look down at me as they pass rapidly into and out of my range of vision – they tend to be behind the wheels of cars (or more commonly, trucks). Especially when I am out walking my cats they assume a number of things about me – I see it in their greasy smirks – that I'm sure are almost all wrong. The look says that they don't know me and don't want to know me, but they know they are superior to me in every way.

These are the Preteen Gangstas who got stuck. Their insecure machismo is still burning strong, but now it is accompanied by a “wisdom” – nothing but the lazy passage of time, really. They have become hardened Gangstas, rolling quickly through life with a certainty that all is shit, and they are among the few who know that. They have teased out and deeply pondered every shred of evidence – while drowning it in their beer and sex – and have decided that if they are unable to find any reason for anything, no one ever will. So they tend to smirk.*

Here is the belly of the beast, where the blank stare of consumerism becomes its hideous rictus. It happens when men – and more than a few women – try to outspend the problem: isn't there some kind of pill I can take to make my problems go away?

There is, and it comes in this big box, and it feels like an everlasting suppository. Will that be Visa or MasterCard?

* Footnote: I get plenty of genuine smiles, too. The difference between a smirk and a smile is that smiles are rife with anticipation, the excitement of not knowing what is going to happen next. Smirks presume to *know* what will happen, which, incidentally, is the same manna upon which good writers feast.

ARE SEAGULLS PAR- ANOID?

The beach is sneaky. Between sneaker waves, dog attacks, seagull and crow hijinks, and human hijinks, and in a place with no natural ground cover, trees, or hiding spots, sneak attacks are difficult to execute but admirable when pulled off. These are the domains of the hunters and the hunted, and this is the grand arena where the chickens are separated from the chicken-hawks.

I watch a seagull in the surf attempt to eat a small, flat fish – a baby flounder or rock fish. The gull flips it with its beak, testing methods by which to swallow it whole, the only way it can imagine in this hungry moment. It pecks at and flips the dead or dying fish not from cruelty – it isn't playing, it's hungry – but because of the impossibility of the shape. It grasps it as if to fly off somewhere quiet, to peck bits of flesh off bit by bit, the hard way. Other gulls have been watching, too, and one of them selects this precise instant to swoop in, startling the gull into dropping the fish into a receding wave, which pulls the fish far enough, fast enough for the usurper to snatch it and fly away, victorious. The victimized gull shrieks with rage, a full-voiced bird scream.

This suggests an understanding of two things: the knowledge that gulls can be startled and that things dropped in the surf will go with it as it retreats. I think the birds test and remember the “intellects” of others, too, and remember which gulls are pigeons.

The birds have evolved within this bald, exposed land-



scape. The knowledge that their every movement can be seen by every other bird on the beach is instinctive. Given the outcome – that the sneaky, aggressive bird flies away with the meal in the end – it is not hard to discern the evolutionary advantage to such villainy. The nature of the beach made the birds sneaky in a logical, evolutionary way.

For one thing, distraction becomes an important tool. The only good way to sneak up on someone – or, in the case of gulls, to sneak *down* on them – is to distract them. For such sneaky creatures, they are remarkably dim-witted on the defense against one another.

The beach is cruel. I wonder if the landscape might have effects on the behavior of animals the way it affects people. What is the effect of cruelty on the seagull psyche?

I watch a seagull gaze around – the head swivels to a point on the near-horizon like a robot's. If it sees something interesting, the reaction is that of a Muppet – it raises its head like a dog or a cat (or a chicken), staring dumbly for effect.

What are they thinking in that moment? My first impression is that there is nothing whatsoever being thought in a bird brain so tiny. Watching longer, though, I begin to have doubts. "Thought" is probably not nearly the correct noun to use, but something akin to apprehension seems to be written in the black marble eyes and quizzical beaks, and I begin to wonder: are most seagulls paranoid?

There is enough time to stare at a thing long and intensely enough that a sort of tunnel vision develops. It is the same emptiness that allows *me* to think. To a seagull, such reveries are traps.

There is no cover here, very few good areas from which to launch sneak attacks. The waving mats of grass shouldn't even be here – they are largely invasives. The grass has exasperated the effort to save endangered birds like the snowy plover, as foxes and other predators can more easily lurk in the dunes – where the birds make their nests – but seagulls aren't involved. No effort is being made to protect them: another argument for paranoia.

It's not just cruelty but drama, the drama of Nature. Also the comedy of it – I would swear they are having Fun, or at least the perpetrators are. Is the concept of Fun as ancient as that of cruelty? If not the concept then at least the reality?

The clever and quick gulls seem to be getting fat at the expense of the slow and the weak. The line between cruelty and Fun is thin and the decisive factors purely subjective. Today's mockers will be tomorrow's mocked. But there is the gull's saving grace: they don't know that.

I see one flock of about a thousand gulls scatter at some silent thunder. Its source turns out to be a single alarmist whose shriek of panic has cowered the whole flock. They recollect within sixty seconds a short distance off, acknowledge that some great stupidity has taken place amongst them, and without a doubt within the mass trampling of webbed feet and preening wings, some ostracism must take place too.

The concept of fairness implies the concept of justice,



but that idea is foreign to animals as well. But animals seem to understand *revenge*.

In campgrounds, local wars sometimes erupt between small groups of birds, tribal wars in the treetops. A robin dies, leaving only one parent to defend the nest. When the sole remaining parent leaves the nest to collect food or nesting material, the predators and scavengers descend on the nest of chicks. The Steller's jays arrive first, three of them, and the noise of their attack draws a murder of crows. The crows and jays fight it out, soaring from branch to branch, clawing, pecking, leaping, screeching horribly all the while. When there is a moment, the remaining robin returns to the nest and the crows and jays, still squabbling, hurry off with the prizes they have claimed. The parent robin, now alone in the world, stands on the lip of the nest and puts up a show of defiance that fools no one any longer, and seems drenched in shame and sorrow.

These violations of human morality occur throughout the animal kingdom without rest, as much part of what it means to be alive as eating and reproducing.

I am lurking around a bay at low tide with my baseball glove, chucking baseballs to myself again, shielding myself under the shadows of shore pines from a non-stop summer sun.

A constant flicker in the corner of my vision causes me to watch from flat on my back as a fat crow has apparently gone insane, and is zooming in a tight circular pattern: zipping just above the tops of the trees, ascending into a one hundred eighty-degree turn, and descending again toward the top of the same tree only to ascend and turn around again. For about thirty seconds it executes the circuit before it pauses atop another

nearby pine.

I sit up. It caws at me – seems to be cawing directly at me, calling me over for a closer look. I oblige, as it descends once again into its loopy flight.

From about one hundred feet I can at last see what is happening. Crow One – the acrobat – is dive-bombing Crow Two, who sits on an exposed horizontal branch in the treetops. Crow One strafes Crow Two, one or both of them cooing indifferently with each pass. It looks like Fun. On closer inspection I see that Crow Two tilts its head each time Crow One zips by, and I imagine he is counting the passes in some crow language. This goes on for about ten minutes. I applaud when they are done, and they fly peacefully away together, two crow pals.

Two weeks later I am back on the same place, but strolling on the beach instead of the bay.

I am startled to recognize Crow Two, waddling along the beach by itself. I only know it is the same bird because now there are four other crows – one of which must be Crow One but it is hard to tell because they are all – all four of them – now dive-bombing Crow Two, singling him out as if he were a savior in a group of disciples, paying homage to The King of Crows. I wonder what the ancient Romans might make of it, what augers might be read in *this* behavior.

Here is true avian athletic artistry, four perfectly synchronized acrobats working with the precision of a team of “Ball of Death” motorcyclists at a county fair-ground. I am reminded of a model of an atom, Crow Two the nucleus. There are no collisions or even near-collisions, with one exception: the four disciples are crowding in on some of the passes, buzzing Crow Two's

head in a way that makes him flinch and squawk with irritation, which only seems to egg them on more.

The acrobats aren't Crow Two's disciples – they are making Fun of him. Crow One has apparently taught the others to do this, or at least they picked it up from watching him. There is another possibility – that Crow Two has been picked on his entire life on this sand spit by a series of Crow Ones; and crows can live for several years.

When at last the acrobats fly away I get a closer look at the King of Crows and notice that aside from his chubbiness, he also seems to have an unusually large head.

Were the crows mocking him because he was different?

Orcas have been known to play a form of the game “catch” with seals they have caught, tossing them into the air with their teeth and battering with them with their tailfins until they stop moving. Cats, of course, play with mice before killing them (and leaving them in a corner, to be discovered in the due course of time). I imagine the ancient Greeks developing some of their observations on the dualities of comedy and tragedy from observing such animal antics.

The Fun that some people seem to get from dogfighting and cockfighting and bullfighting is from the suffering of the animals themselves. The Fun of cruelty is the only point. These are like the nurseries of serial killers, where the evil of human nature boils and clarifies itself, renews itself – where all conscience is annihilated. Should it be surprising that animals have their own versions of the same impulses?

If animals seem to be spared the horror of the contem-

plation of their own deaths, is there some other sense in which they might judge the world – their world if not ours – to be unfair? Does this kind of thing require cognitive thought, or might some innate but unpremeditated synthesis of both Fun and cruelty be necessary for survival – which is all any animal can ever really accomplish, no matter how it is done – at least in some environments?

Maybe here is the bottomless pit into which one can be thrown by recklessly anthropomorphic philosophy.

The beach is sneaky – like Happiness.

These are high-profile crimes because they occur out in the open on a beach, but when I'm not here to witness them they go on without me, year by year since life began, and will continue long after you and I and these gulls themselves are gone.

The next seagull I walk past I eye warily, as I image he eyes me. What's he planning?

P O C K E T S O F F U Z Z W I T H C R Y S T A L L I N E E Y E S

My theory is that fisherman really don't give a flying flounder if you think they look scruffy. Fishermen are *supposed* to look scruffy. The roughness of the faces of the people match the roughness of the land and sea,

and appearances speak loudly even among those who don't care what they look like: facial hair like a pocket of wild cotton, sun and wind-blasted lips, runny eyes and red noses, any visible facial skin baggy and sandpapery – ear hair galore.

The effects of weathering are evident in both body and personality. The wind, rain, and sea seem to have an erosive effect on fanciness similar to the effects they have on skin – refined tastes and extraneous niceties are blown away in the raging elements. I recognize it in fishermen because I have witnessed it in myself.

The casual plainness of such men – and more than a few women – results in the colorful but short and choppy language of the sea being dragged onto dry land like a crab pot. Human interaction is boiled down to straightforward sentence structures and stunted vocabularies. At the end of the day, after the day's catch has been hauled in, weighed, and cleaned, the day's labor done and well won, these men and women switch to an evening language, the vocabulary of the salty tall tale, of mermaids and sea-creatures: pure, sweet bullshit.

They take their oceanworthy selves into town, and rather than change their behavior, they change the town to suit them. Seeing a hardened fisherman is like seeing a trumpeter swan, a thing that must exist – not least as an archetype of the god Poseidon that ripples through our culture, in the Sea Captain from *The Simpsons*, the Gordon's fisherman, Ernest Hemingway, and so on – but still one is surprised to find them in the flesh, looking and acting like they are meant to act, the most colorful people in the room, but only one

distinct variety among many.

I am reminded that I share with them this attitude on the rare occasions when I bother to look at my reflection on encountering a mirror – I too am often unshaven, perpetually looking in need of a hot shower (which I often am, even when I've just had one). It's not that I don't care how I look, only that I have more on my mind. Any attempt I make to pretty myself up will be undone by the next gale or downpour anyway – what's the point?

Northwesterners are an outdoor people, and the outdoors are messy – something has to give.

T H E L O N E P I N E

In the first earnest breezes of autumn, the shore pines make a squeaking sound before they begin to snap. That's the sound of Halloween around here – the quiet of the gallows after an execution. Ghost ships make a similar sound, legends say.

The sound is perfect for the occasion, which tonight is a good old-fashioned night hike: these are what happens when I can't fall asleep and the earthquake trick doesn't work. Outside, a gibbous moon lights the Road enough for me that I don't need a flashlight, which is the only proper way to do this.

Part of the Fun of a night hike is the erasure of visual information. The ears become more important as the visual palette is reduced to only one color – the off-blue



glow of moonlight – and very few shades even of that. Lacking fireflies, the coast becomes a place of cavernous darkness deep in the forest on cloudy nights, more or less completely photonless – except for campfires and cell phones.

On damp and foggy nights the fog itself seems to produce a kind of light, and I suppose it does, scattering the available rays randomly, rebounding a few into even the darkest corners.

I go back to see the Lone Pine again because I sense there is something I didn't get right the first time, in the daylight. There is something I know I missed, so

ating in a subterranean suburbia.

Hills made by moles pock the surface of a meadow such that it looks like a battlefield left in its natural state to commemorate a great rodential artillery duel. The moles resort to trench warfare, bunkers and secret tunnels concealed by gnarled roots and bambooe groves of rushes and beachgrass: they know this place too well – we can't win. There is something alive in the earth, something not so much trying to get out as to get *through*.

Molehills in the darkness look either like mountainous

I'm going back to the same place at night, to look again. This is a thing learned on *The Road*: situations are seldom as clear as they seem even after we've been looking at them a long while, what is really going on always more complex. I am trying to see it all accurately and keep myself honest.

So I go back.

The earth writhes on its surface, where tiny, defenseless mammals swarm, building homes and sleeping and procre-

turd piles or what they actually are, the places where these underground creatures – I only see dead ones, because the rest like to maintain low profiles, the lowest possible – choose to burst through the surface, which must be something to moles like jumping into water is for us.

I am used to looking down, at where I place my feet. It is easy to avoid the dark circles of the molehills against the green carpet of grass. Carefully watching where one places one's feet – deceptively simple and the key to the whole thing. How does one negotiate a hazard safely? One carefully watches one's feet.

The difficulty of lightless night hikes is often illusory. In the many shaded places – where the moon's light is intercepted by the treetops, casting shadows on the ground like puddles – it is difficult always to tell which obstacles are real. I take an exaggerated step over a dark blob I mistake for a speed bump in the road and wind up tripping on a *real* speed bump and into a pot-hole on the other side, concealed in broad moonlight: a step made difficult by the illusion of difficulty.

The illusion of a difficult step is what causes me to look again at The Lone Pine – the feeling that the land is trying to speak, so I should listen.

Let me say that again: it seems as if the land is trying to speak.

I approach The Lone Pine in darkness, its roundness made obvious in the luminescent fog rolling in from the river, the edges of its silhouette the only clear lines I can see tonight. And I *do* see it clearly at last: The Lone Pine is actually two. There is a shriveled dwarf shore pine standing in front of the much larger pine be-

hind it, a windbreak for it, like the leading runner in a wedge formation formed by a charging army. In truth, the two pines probably actually *are* one closely united entity, perhaps budding from the same stem some underground point that I can't see, or at least close cousins with roots intermingled and partially fused – maybe that's one source of their collective strength on this raging riverbank.



The shore pine, *pinus contorta*, is an invasive species in New Zealand. It is as aggressive there as gorse is here.

In firewood terms, shore pine logs are the pieces of knotty, twisty, dense wood that is hard to cut but easy to shred, making strips that tend to look like uncooked and extremely splintery pasta.

The trees “blossom” in spring, forming at the ends of their branches a clump of pollen sacs that will harden into egg-shaped seed cones when spring dries into early summer.

They are perhaps best appreciated from a distance, where in spring their bright, bushy leaves can make a craggy mountainside look soft. There is Natural Romance in them.

The new growth of shore pines, as with nearly all other plants, leans subconsciously south. All growing tips of a single tree lean at the same angle in the same direction. Different species of conifers bend at different angles, and in different ways. Some bend in a graceful, subtle, southward arc. Some jut awkwardly. Those of shore pines, appropriately, bend according to the weirdness of the angle to which their parent limbs are attached to the main trunk (if any) of the tree: built-in displacements, the archaic lineage of the species evident in its latest incarnation. This kind of thing has been going on here for aeons.

A study from 2011 indicates that due to climate change, shore pines will virtually disappear from Oregon by the end of the century, due to competition from species more suited to drier and warmer conditions. A closely related subspecies, the lodgepole pine, is a major source

of logged lumber east of the Cascade Range. Both subspecies are likely to disappear from the wild.

The Oregon Coast will look utterly transformed without the twisted silhouettes of *pinus contorta*. Gone will be the dense thickets of wind-sculpted greenery that lends a softness to the beach dunes and cliffs. The landscape itself is in danger of extinction. It will still be here, but it will not be this.

Parks and private land owners would certainly be able to chop down the pine’s competitors in a given area or plant new saplings – human intervention may have caused the climatic catastrophe, but may also be the agent of its survival. On the other hand, there has been no major replanting effort for the redwoods so far.*

PETS AS SUBJECTS FOR THE STUDY OF NATURE

My cats look me squarely in the eyes when they are trying to communicate something to me – when they are hungry or fed up with my teasing or eager for play. If human eyes are the windows on the soul and pets don’t have souls, what then are a pet’s eyes a window onto?

* Footnote: Although some conservationists on the Oregon Coast and elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest have started planting a few small groves in preparation of coming climate changes, which might make Oregon ideal for a rebirth of the redwoods, if money can be found.



When I call their names they look at my eyes and I talk to them and they don't understand what I am saying, but they seem to understand that *something* has been communicated in their direction, and they often answer back, and I get the same feeling – that they have said something but I know not what.

In our own ways we both kind of shrug and go back to our respective lives, both unsure what the moment might mean – if anything – but certain that some form of communication has taken place. As direct communications with Nature of a sort, such seemingly insignificant moments appear at least to be worthy of a quick

analysis.

Pets manage a rare feat, splitting their time between the animal and human worlds, and equally at Home in both. Although they've rarely been tested, I reckon my cats' survival skills in the wild to be virtually zero. They are lazy and flabby like humans, but when they get sick I take them to a veterinarian, not a doctor. I could kill them if I wanted to. All told, they are undeniably animals, but are treated in many ways like fellow humans – an odd state of affairs.

The relationship isn't equal in any way – I am clearly the most important member of the unit. I provide the

food, the water, the shelter, and the warmth. I even clean up the poop. Any attempt to analyze any communication between myself and my pets must account for the base lop-sidedness of the relationship. I'm the leader, and they are wholly dependent on me. I am undeniably in charge. I really am.

The only cruelty that takes place in this interaction is when Sid, the only experienced hunter among us, drags a mostly-dead mouse or mole into the trailer from outside or – considerably less cruelly, in my opinion – has captured a mouse that has inadvisably managed to

make a temporary Home in my kitchen cabinetry.

The relationship between pet and pet owner isn't always cordial, of course, but I think in most cases the relationship is a kind and mutually satisfying one. Most owners adore their pets, and if animal behavior can be considered an indicator of an animal's mood – I am convinced that they have them the same as humans, even if they can't understand them – the feeling is usually mutual.



Photographing animals seems to lend itself to anthropomorphism. It is almost automatic. The best way to photograph pets is usually at eye level. It makes the portrait more intimate, which is really the whole point. It could be argued that all animal portraiture involves anthropomorphism since we involuntarily project human expectations on all photo subjects, even inanimate objects.

It is always a human, after all, who sets up and takes the shot.

I befriend the dogs of my fellow campers sometimes, those spending a few days at the campground. They run up to me on the beach for a quick petting. I don't know if they can smell me or if they recognize me visually, but it has happened enough that I know we part as friends. Then they disappear with no goodbye – gone Home along with their masters. But new dogs arrive every day, along with more cats, potbellied pigs, ferrets, even a parrot or two.

The *Corps of Discovery* bought dogs from the Indians they encountered, to use as food. Lewis especially seemed to like the taste and the effect of dog meat on his health. He seems to have been truly smitten with it, leaving me to wonder if he missed it upon returning to the United States or if he may have found a substitute.*

At least once a week I take each of my cats for a short stroll through the environs of the campsite – as close

* Footnote: Lewis at the time had a pet dog, Seaman, that accompanied them on their trip. Seaman remained uneaten but was stolen by Indians whereupon Lewis urgently sent a party after them, with orders to shoot the thieves on sight. The dog was rescued in the end.

to pointless wandering in Nature as my cats ever get. They have all by now become accustomed to the harnesses they must wear, although Torgo's is a bit too small for him, or he imagines it is. His upper body stiffens and he staggers around without bending his front limbs – mewling outrage all the while – so that it looks like I'm playing some cruel joke on him, a feline version of a wedge. I get strange looks, but a cat on a leash is often a useful conversation-starter. The walks ultimately do us all good, as strolls in Nature always do.

Usually I lead them, but sometimes I allow them to lead me around and I follow behind, to give them the illusion of control. These last tend to be walks that involve a lot of milling about and staring, and that return to the same places over and over, not the way I would do it at all.

I have constructed a screen of nylon golf course driving-range netting that fits over one of my slideouts. This way my cats can go outside through one of the opened windows of the slideout, and I (usually) don't have to worry about them. They demand to be allowed outside twice a day like clockwork and without fail rain or shine: once when I wake up (or, more precisely, just before), and once more immediately after sunset.

The first of these, however, is based on an understanding that they will not be released until I get up, and that I can't be awakened easily.** The second appears to be a biological remnant yet to be domesticated out of them,

** Footnote: Steve has a method whereby he wanders up to my side and puts his face a few inches from my own. When my eyes open, he smiles and slams into my side, dropping his entire weight against me, flopping on top of me. It works, and the smile ensures he doesn't get a rude slap instead. He has always known how to get to me. Is his behavior a biological remnant of some evolutionary sort, too, or is he having Fun, or both?

a genetic holdover from an era when cats used to hunt for their food, which of course is the reason they were domesticated in the first place.

Sid likes to scratch out holes in the sand, a habit encoded in his genes but given new life by my own habit of praising him when he then poops into the holes – making less of it that I will have to clean up myself. He always buries it well, so I'm not concerned.

He once begins to scratch a hole in the sand because I am about to take him inside and he knows that if he keeps scratching I will not pick him up and take him in, but will wait patiently while he attends to his business. Ten minutes later and he has dug a bucket-sized hole in the ground using nothing but his little paws. Having dug, he then crawls into the hole, and virtually all I can see are the tips of his ears shaking with the strain of his bowels. When he is finished, it takes another ten minutes as he obsessively smothers every possible odor with the piles of sand he has created around the peripheries.

My two eldest cats are getting on in years, but they still tussle sometimes. A pathetic affair, really: one is declawed, obese and hideously uninspired as a pugilist, the other is made of steel and as wild as Lucifer in a mock fight, but an inveterate wimp when it shows any sign of turning real – not just a wimp, but the definer and redefiner of a type of wimpdom that he created, a raconteur of wimpiness, a true master.

They periodically bash one another with blunted claws and feebly gnaw on each other's necks and it occurs to me that this is a fight between crotchety old men, all canes and flying hearing aids, and it looks as absurd as such fights always look. I egg them on. Steve could

use the exercise.

Sid – the cat so mis-wired that he attacks his trailermates when any strays come in the vicinity – sleeps obliviously through such household squabbles, the same quality that makes him so easy to travel with. He can't be phased by anything.*

Sid is also Exhibit A in my search for evidence for a link between Fun and cruelty. Why else but for Fun does he play with a thing he has caught before he kills it and leaves it for me to find (or, just as often, he fails to kill it and he falls asleep, leaving me to locate it and chase it outside before it ruins all of the food underneath my sink).**

Sid likes to escape. If he is allowed to go into the screened enclosure at night, I usually attach a blinking LED light to his collar, but I often forget. When I realize he is missing I check first under the trailers of other campers, a favored haunt of his that at least invites op-

* Footnote: When I took him to be neutered when he was only a few months old, my car broke down in the sweltering Tucson summer sun. In his carrier and just having undergone involuntary castration, Sid murmured not a word of dissent during the three hours it took us to get Home. If ever a cat was made for traveling, it's Sid.

** Footnote: In these cases, I suspect he lets it live so that he will be able to play with it again later, after his nap. For an entire summer I wake up every day to find my cupboard doors wide open; while I have slept, Sid has been poking his paws into every cranny, searching for the rodent. When I at last find it – I hear it munching away in the evening while I am meant to be relaxing – I am somewhat repulsed to discover it is not a mouse or even a rat, but a fully-grown squirrel of an uncommon variety – I never see it well enough to comprehend it, but it is huge, about half the size of Sid himself. It has been living in the basement of my trailer and coming up at night to gnaw into my packages of ramen noodles and saltine crackers, stowing away underneath my refrigerator on travel days.



portunities to meet the neighbors – although they usually meet me when I’m panicked and mildly furious.

Sometimes he comes back on his own after a few hours. If the campground is crowded and there is a lot to look at, I instead have to chase him down, poking here and there and enquiring: “You guys didn’t happen to see a little black and white cat run through here, did you?” This is always answered by: “A what? A cat?”

One neighbor I left feeling especially bewildered after he answered my question with this: “I didn’t see anything... at all.”

“Oh, okay, thanks,” I say, moving on and not piecing it together until later. He had been wearing dark sunglasses with a walking stick at his side, in an ADA-approved campsite. He was blind, and making a joke that I failed to notice because I was too involved in my own problems.

I hate it when that happens.

I catch an ant and manage to pick it up without hurting it. I throw it out an open window probably before it even has time to discover it has been hijacked from the pillow on which it has been crawling. Sid has followed



the action. A few moments after it has been so carefully and tenderly plucked from a sunlit pillowcase (and unceremoniously hurled from the premises), it rests in his stomach, having been gnawed to shreds by what, still slimy from a fifth birthday treat of canned Friskies, must have been some very stinky teeth. At least it goes quickly as a crunchy dessert, an after-dinner mint.

Sid smiles up at me through the window, licking ant parts from his fuzzy cat lips, so cute.

F I E L D T R I P

I'm snug in a beach dune on a blustery afternoon, warm and untouched in a cozy natural fort, a clear spot where the wind howls but the beachgrass by itself is enough to block a person-sized hole in the insistent wind. In yet another pair of optimistic shorts, I am only barely freezing.

Two dozen middle-schoolers peck at and scamper over the beach like sandpipers on wings of the flaps of wind-breakers, jackets pulled from closets a week ago during a sudden September cold snap.

They all carry large, clear plastic bags to collect specimens – of what, I'm never sure – that dangle from the limbs of the schoolchildren like the leaves of autumn. It is a flash mob with a purpose: this is a field trip.

I watch from a dune as one boy drops his plastic bag while he is playing with another group of boys. As it is torn from his grasp there is a brief pause as he watches it recede like a tumbleweed, and I remember that feeling of panic – it is universal – before he begins to race after it, blue synthetic jacket flapping behind him like a superhero. Thus begins a marathon that will take him about a half-mile on rapidly tiring legs on which he'll start to wobble – I see his knees begin to buckle a few times, but he never falls down – and he'll twice consider giving up, as will be evident in his body language.

At one point he almost has it. As he bends to pick it up he must realize he is stepping on it when he tries to pull it up and it is instead ripped out of his fingers; when he lifts his foot to free it, it catches in a sudden gust, out of reach again just like that.

I have seen other children have to chase things tumbling along the sand ahead of them and they all collapse on the object upon reaching it. If an adult is watching, they also moan and make a great show of the difficulty of their breathing, milking the drama like an NBA star (or soccer star, or football star, et cetera). That said, I have yet to see one give up.

The boy at last collapses on it and shudders a moment, exhausted. He rises, and begins to sprint again, back to the rest of his class.

As this has been going on, I've been watching a few girls who have wandered off on their own. They poke at the sand, sit and chat and do one another's hair. When the

teachers begin to corral everyone to go back to school the girls hurriedly stuff their plastic bags in about two minutes.

They've known what they were looking for and where to find it because they come to the beach often and – knowing they would have plenty of time to complete their task – the smartest girls in class have used the opportunity for a free recess: Fun trumps science.

Toddlers charge bravely at the sea, turn on a spot – the exact place varies with the bravery of the toddler – then an equally determined sprint for dry land. A few years later they will begin to taunt the ocean – throwing rocks and performing intimidating dances at it, counting coup like Indian braves.

I see an incredibly small toddler – more like a newborn, it seems from a distance – led to the Edge of the water by his parents, who have lifted him from his stroller for the occasion. There is a ceremony involved – the toddler has obviously never seen an ocean before, and this is his big moment. He approaches semi-warily, looks an instant longer while his parents try to coax him into play, and then turns on the spot, wobbles back to the stroller and makes a mad scramble into it, giving in instantly to an uncontrollable urge to escape this new threat as quickly as possible.

A herd of Preteen Gangstas have turned the trails that lead to and from the restrooms, the little footpaths, into makeshift BMX trails. They are oblivious to everyone who isn't them, and even then they are aloof and cool. I eavesdrop because I can't help it – they are a few feet from my trailer.

A discussion about age begins because it is the chief way in which they determine power within the gang. They establish that twelve years old is the minimum among them by posturing: “Dude, remember what it was like when you were eleven?” one twelve year old asks another.

“I drive my Dad’s F-350 all the time,” a boy of about ten lies to his new friends, to prove he is a *mature* twelve. “You’re fifteen?” another asks him after he has been put on the spot and asked his age. “How can that kid be fifteen?” the boy will ask another, after the little liar rides off.

And so it goes as they tear up the campground, executing stunt-jumps from the exposed knots of tree roots. The taunts about age cause an overload of testosterone in their developing brains and they become bullies, growing louder and more obnoxious and more active in their toughness, picking on kids smaller than themselves and then on adults. I am apprehensive about the week ahead, the last full week of summer vacation and never have I wanted school to start so much.

The lying game accelerates to absurdity: “You’re *sixteen* years old?” one of them says with incredulity cut evenly with awe. It has yet to occur to him that a sixteen-year-old doesn’t willingly hang out with a group of twelve-year-olds for any reason, ever.

They are obsessed with their own pending adulthoods. They may simply be jerks and they may grow out of it, but they celebrate it for a while – it is their time to be immature jerks, and they savor it. I bet it has been building all summer, but now – I noticed a “Back to School” sale at a store recently with approval – summer is almost over. Soon on Wednesday afternoons they will be sitting in classrooms, and I suspect these boys



don't care much for school. Indeed, ignorance seems to be the whole point.

A smaller kid comes back to the road after having gone a distance down the now-destroyed footpath. "They made fun of me," she says to her own friends, more girls.

They whisper conspiratorially before I hear one: "Let's get this boy!" Then they begin to stalk them.

In the end, they have to simply wait until the Gangstas ride off, and in the sudden silence I hear them: "Let's go. There's no boys."

“Among them it was customary to speak of the Indian men as a Buck; of the woman as a Squaw; until at length, in the general acceptance of these terms, they ceased to recognize the rights of Humanity in those to whom they were applied. By a very natural and easy transition, from being spoken of as brutes, they came to be thought of as game to be shot, or as vermin to be destroyed. This shows the force of association, and the wrong of speaking in derogatory terms of those we regard as our inferiors. Thus the poor Indian, by being spoken of as a brute, is cast beyond the pale of a common humanity where the killing of him ceases to be murder, and no atrocity is considered cruel or unjust.”

– John Beeson



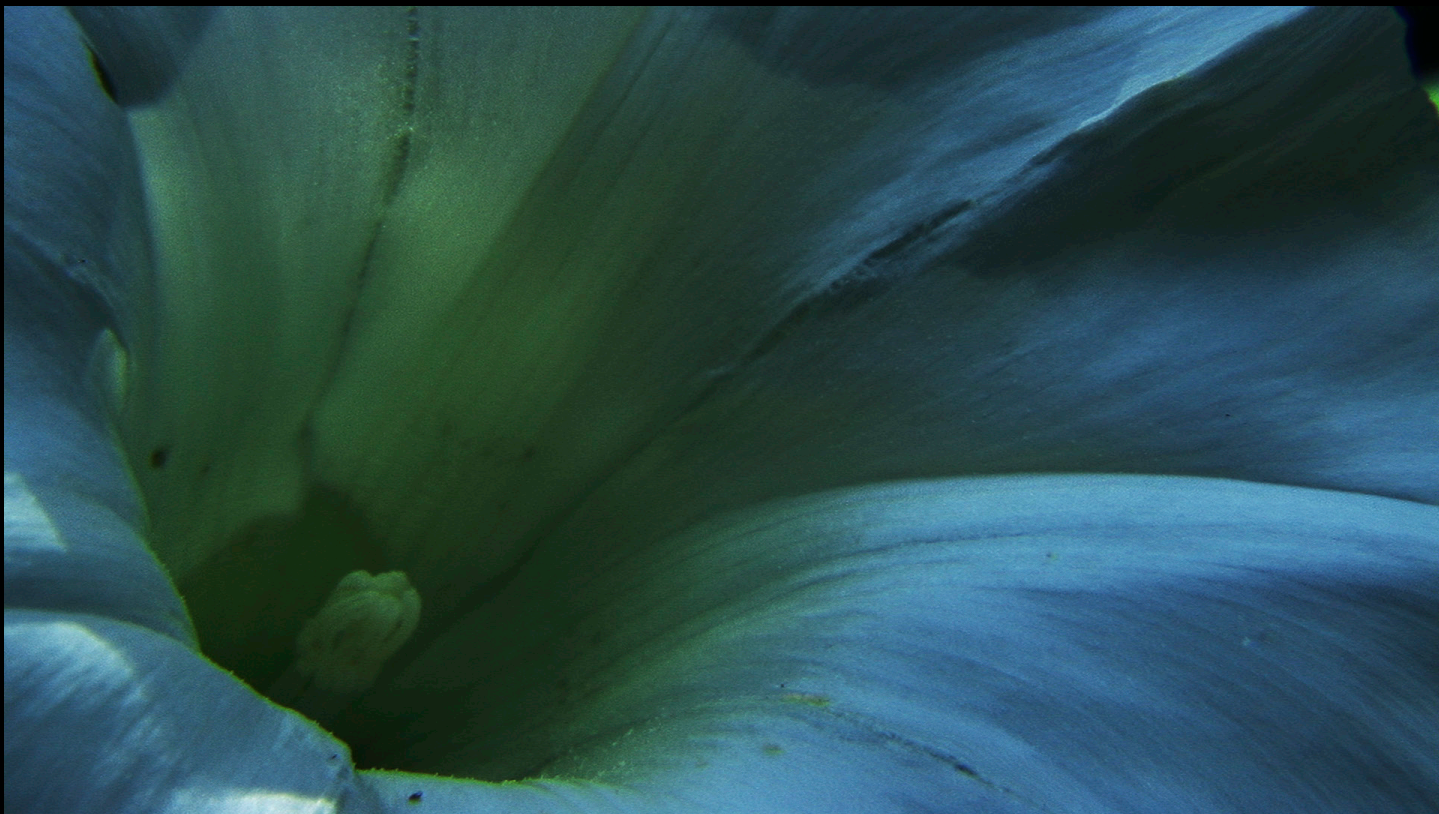
THE ROAD, THE PUZZLE, AND THE FLOWERS OF PARADISE

In the imagination we can try to roll back all of the changes done to the land as the result of various invasions of non-native species just as easily as we can undo the recent work of manmade jetties. For the moment this is the best we can really do, but it is possible too to imagine that in the future genetically targeted substances may be used to wipe out local pockets of invasion. There is also a tangle of ethical implications to be sorted through first but until then we can only do this: the beachgrasses would virtually all be gone, replaced by herds of migratory, unstable dunes like those that still roam freely along the Central Coast. The ubiquity of Himalayan blackberries, foxglove, scotch broom, gorse, and hundreds of other species - many of them the ones we see so often that many visitors assume they must

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be native - would be replaced by true natives like trailing blackberries, salal, and salmonberries with plenty of room to grow tall.

The southern coast is known as Oregon's Banana Belt, although no bananas are grown here. The climate is generally milder and sunnier, the February Fairs more common. Within a frisbee's-throw of California, the city of Brookings-Harbor is like steam venting from a lid on the extreme north of the state, where fast cars, rollerblades and cilantro begin to percolate ever-northward, preaching Californiacation like a new gospel.



On the South Coast is a landmark known as Thunder Rock. It is an enormous freestanding rock mountain that is connected to the mainland (as of this writing) by a narrow bridge of land that plummets two hundred feet on either side, and a new recurrent nightmare to those of us afflicted with acrophobia.

The cove below does indeed make the sound of thunder - virtually indistinguishable from genuine thunder resonating from a thunderstorm at a distance of five miles. Not only this, the entire rock body vibrates with each explosive wave that rips into the tiny harbor formed by the rock itself.

I love Thunder Rock.

Three Weekend Freaks ride by me on bikes, crushing in exultation every slug they see. The kids groan when they miss; the adult - who no doubt hates the slugs at Home, too - chuckles to himself. Some are cut in half; one half tries to ooze back into the grass while tiny ants begin to devour the rest. The slugs and snails I stepped carefully over on the trip out become the slimy deaths I witness the whole way home: another death hike. These happen sometimes - some days the versions and varieties of death stack up, making of the day a macabre festival. Some days I see only death.

T H E R O A D , T H E P U Z Z L E , A N D T H E F L O W E R S O F P A R A D I S E

On the North Coast is a headland known as “Hug Point” due to the fact that one has to hug the wall of rock to pass around it without drowning. A makeshift trail for wagons has somehow been carved into the rock, thus introducing to the images my brain uses to make nightmares the specter of attempting to pass my truck and trailer around the point because 101 is washed out, a line of violently impatient fellow drivers behind me, my truck sputtering with the uphill effort, and a rising tide. It doesn’t help that my truck actually *does* struggle on 101 near Hug Point, an especially bedeviling part of the highway even in waking, modern life.

As the summers and winters have come and gone I’ve started to notice things: the same elderly campers take the same sites in the wintertime, like they have a favorite; the teenager who used to pump my gas in this small fishing village has moved to that city and now works as a security guard, upwardly mobile and Happy; the local old man who used to wander this beach for driftwood hasn’t been seen in months – sick or worse.

And out of the blue people begin to recognize my face and call me by name, like Magic. Some familiar dogs beg to be unleashed when they see me, to come and say hello again.

Old men with farmer’s tans drive through campground loops as if on the backroads of their farms, or as driving



a load of hay to market. There is an apparent carelessness I recognize from the old farmers I saw growing up, a sight harrowing to lookers-on and to their own wives, but Fun for children and dogs and the old men themselves, like urging Dad to get the car up to one hundred on regulation square-mile country roads, accelerating on the apex of the hills for a quarter-second's weightlessness.

Another dog zips by, grinning maniacally.

Locked in steep fog in September, I begin to feel as if I'm snug in a tidy and humble Home made of my own skin. The fog makes the dunes and the wobbly spires of beachgrass feel close, like a security blanket. I can see about one hundred yards in every direction except down, which is sand pocked with the follicles of the grass, now yellowing and soon to be tanning to the dark brown of autumn. Another summer gone: in the fog it feels like a return to the womb.

A tingle on exposed skin confirms it – the fog has turned to the softest drizzle possible, the harsh beams of July gone, just like that, from nowhere on an ordinary September day.

I don't see them but I hear them as I turn to go: a few final squeals of Fun.

One of my great dreams for the future is to hike the length of The Oregon Coast Trail from Astoria to Brookings, an odyssey fueled purely by rubbery muscles and a will to see more, a daydream her creators surely had in mind when they designed her.

Many of the people who look homeless along the side of 101 are in fact hikers on the trail, which detours the more imposing or otherwise unnavigable headlands and bays. Be nice to them.

The designers of the hiking systems here seem to have known I would need a goal to follow to its End in this unending paradise. They mark and maintain The Trail for people like me.

On the Fourth of July, a ship out at sea shoots fireworks that appear as brief flickering blips on the horizon. The smoke from the Manzanita fireworks drift toward me with Neahkahnie Mountain looming dark blue as a hazy backdrop, a full harvest moon rising over the Coast Range, rising over the shadowy dunes and swaying, chattering huddles of beachgrass. I have seen this beach utterly barren, virtually inhospitable, but tonight it is spectacular: dozens of campfires dot the beach, cascades of sparks erupt from giggling masses of huddled silhouettes.

In daylight I stand in the surf under the bluest sky ever – impossibly high, choppy clouds lending a half-hearted overcast and at my feet the bursting of individual bubbles of seafoam creating a carpet of concentric ripples in the sunshine, like colored lights on the dance floor at a rave – and I am thinking about nothing but another hot cup of noodle soup and another cold bottle of bubblegum soda, and I wonder if this might not be *exactly* where I belong in the universe.



THE PACE OF MOD- ERN LIVING

Each spring a curious thing happens to me. I begin to rush to finish tasks that I had lazily preoccupied myself with during the long winter hours. I begin to walk faster, talk faster, make decisions faster. Then at some point I look around me and realize I am no longer alone: the tourists have returned.

I have been influenced by an influx of human energy, and have involuntarily altered my own behavior to match their prevailing pace, to not be left behind. Like a slow-rolling river becomes a raging torrent where a particularly heavy tributary contributes its waters to the main channel, I have sped myself up to match the common speed around me. It takes some time before it occurs to me that I have been here all along, doing fine.

I usually notice it when I discover that the relative privacy I enjoyed when the campground was empty is now gone. Privacy for campers fluctuates with the seasons, too.

There are natural rhythms to things, and then there are rhythms we try to impose, expecting the pace around us to be faster and match our own, rather than slowing our own pace to match that embedded in the place. It is not all slow – part of the appeal of adventure sports is the joy of matching one's own pace to the place and finding the place faster. The adrenaline is very much real and primal.

From atop a cliff I watch two tourists hurrying down the beach, an exceedingly happy little dog trotting along at their feet. I know they are tourists because they appear to be fleeing, they are walking so quickly. I expect one or both of them to trip over themselves because their feet aren't able to keep up with the demands the rest of their bodies are asking of them. They appear to be late for a meeting somewhere, but we are all on a Pacific beach: the only meetings here are accidental.

Beaches are made for two speeds, really. I've seen a fair number of joggers and bicyclists, usually decked out in proper workout attire – running shoes, sweat bands, baggy loose pants or shorts, helmets. This is one speed.

The other speed is *perambulation*, a word appropriately slow to emerge from the lips. This is the common speed here – relax, take your time, contemplate the ocean, contemplate a rock, maybe two, maybe three.

The two tourists have discovered the mythological third speed, a speed theorized but seldom attempted here, the speed of the city. Even when they stop to rest they continue to fidget, talking with their hands, kicking sand with their feet.* The dog now sits in the sand and stares up at them, its belly heaving and its tongue dripping reckless slobber into the sand – the dog *gets* it.

A mere thirty seconds and they are off again, zipping past my perch, still talking with hands, gone past me

* Footnote: A legal stimulant may be here involved. Espresso stands don't pock the margins of the entire length of the coast for no good reason – we are all hardcore junkies (except the Mormons).





and mere blips on the horizon now, away so fast that they barely register at all. I wonder if they will remember any of it; I wonder if they will remember they were here at all.

ROADRUNNER: ARCHETYPE OF AN AMERICAN MOMENT

Not only is it the last day of school, it is that moment after the final bell has rung, a moment that lingers all

day and remains as a reminder of Fun for a lifetime. Only with the passage of time do such memories become tainted. The students don't know it, but for some it is the day that they will never see their Friends again; people will move away during the summer, things will happen: the other side of summer, and the most interesting side. On the other hand, it is always best to have more Fun ahead – the school bell still ringing in your ears – than behind. The moment the bell rings is the point where the Fun begins, before any hint that it might all go bad from here, if it's going to.

I am driving, and the atmosphere in my mind's eye is one of unarticulated summertime – rock 'n' roll and girls, daredevil recklessness without consequences, an orgy of Fun and opportunities for more of it, all of it, as much as anyone could want of it – indeed, excesses



are the whole point. And in America, sex and Fun always arrive with a counterpoint, a distinct and wholly culpable Edge of Doom. That's the direction the movie always takes at some point and thanks to post-modernism, sometimes it doesn't come back.*

Vehicles are always clean and gleaming in such scenarios, unlike my filthy truck; *The Road* tests the limits of one's cleanliness.** And my air freshener accomplishes nothing but is equally iconic to the moment, so it stays, like the fuzzy little dice in the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon* – Chewbacca keeps hitting his head on them.

The whole thing is immediate and self-contained. The effect of the experience is like becoming lost in the wilderness, in that all externalities disappear – all that I think about is what is happening inside of (and just outside of) the truck. Just for as long as the car ride lasts, the car ride is all that exists or ever will.

This is *my* migration, the moment I find the motive force to overcome my own lazy inertia and start to move toward greener pastures ahead, a little further on down *The Road*.

* Footnote: Such moments in movies as often occur near the beginnings of films as near the ends. The technique is as often used to show a character's discontent with his or her situation as it is the hero's happy resolutions of a crisis. Like the word *aloha*, it feels similar but means something entirely different depending on the context.

** Footnote: I will discover a seed that has sprouted in the bed of my truck one spring. The mystery plant will grow to about two feet before the summer's lack of rain finally shrivels it to Nothing. Dust to dust, I say.

I flip a mix CD into my car stereo. Here is a thing that becomes harder and harder to reenact with every new year. I can't find a radio station that plays appropriately moody music, I can't slide an eight-track into a stacked deck or even a little plastic cassette – all as can be seen in the movies.*

Yet without music, the moment is Nothing. The moment can't happen, or it never has to me. The songs drift in and out of the story, always present, providing uncannily genuine narration more often than might be expected by mere chance, raucous tunes about freedom and fear and the future.

I could be Dustin Hoffman or Kevin Bacon or Dennis Hopper or Tom Cruise or... or... or....

I am living an archetypal moment, an American cliché, and I revel in it.

The urge to ingest substances, drive too fast, shoot a deer between the eyes – these draw from the same sources: dissatisfaction and a fantasy that by action, satisfaction can be had. Or it could be the thrill of doing something just to know one has done it: reality is not what it seems, therefore the dissatisfaction isn't "real." We feel alive when we do these things because these things "shouldn't" be done; it is the relief of temporarily lifting the veil of politeness that makes them Fun. Breaking the rules is Fun. Woe be to your liver and veins, roadside trees, and the deer's self-awareness, such as they are.

* Footnote: I can think of only one instance of characters using a compact disk to invoke such a moment, and that was in an episode of *The Sopranos* – a television show that swims in Doom – toward the End of its run.

I smell my pine air freshener and remember all the air fresheners I have owned, something that reminds me of all the cars I have owned, of the crappy and probably by now stolen SUV I left parked at a junkyard in Tucson at twenty-five dollars a month, a bill I have avoided paying for three years now. I'm not concerned, though. The guy who owned the place seemed insane when I gave him my last spare key. I doubt he'll remember me.

I left it all behind for this moment, it seems to me Now, as it always does to the actor playing this role in any motion picture made silent in its moment by the music. I take a self-portrait in my mind, one that reflects tragedy and loss even though, in truth, I haven't lost a single thing that matters in The End, and have lost many things I will be Happier without.

This is what mass culture has taught me is to be its ideal – if I was wearing the right shoes, with a girlfriend who stunk of the right perfume and had the right hair, and I was drinking a sparkling-cold bottle of the right soft drink, using the right credit card, holding the right cell phone, et cetera, et cetera. This is as close as I can get on my own to a starring role in my own movie, or my own rock opera, or my own commercial advertisement.

I am aware that I am living a cliché, but the point is that *I* am living it. I'm not watching someone else live it. It is a moment of my own devise.

So I turn the stereo up.

Summer nights in the mountains are dreamlike. Autumn evenings are as they are everywhere on the con-

inent – crisp air and football games, caramel apples and pumpkin pie, brilliant, blazing leaves, and the smell they make when burned: days when the leaden sky is cozy rather than harsh.

The Road bends and dips whimsically as if by design, but the guiding principle is that of topography – Nature always dictates the courses of roads, calls the names of the tunes of transit like a square-dance caller. The course of the journey is always determined this way, Nature making The Road and The Road making the narrative, supplying the imagery and plot points, the themes and structure: but the *meaning* is always in the hands of the pilot.

Here are highways that cut into mountain tunnels and create briefly for passengers that surreal few seconds where we all get to pretend for a moment that we are driving indoors, driving through our own Homes, sliding on the linoleum of the kitchen in our socks and leaving fantasy skid-marks behind – the only indication we were even here.

Going south with a large trailer is uniquely easier than



going north. Places to pull over to the side – such as to let impatient jerks pass by – favor the side with the ocean on it. In the former situation, there are several recurrent opportunities to stop, get out, stretch legs. This is much more difficult in the latter. Treebeard from *The Lord of The Rings* is right: going south really does feel a bit like going downhill.

The Northwest – at least from beyond the Canadian border to well into California and from the slopes of the Cascades to the beach – is a hiker's paradise. When I get to the End of this Road, I will get out of my truck, grab my walking stick and set off down a twisty forest trail with no clue as to what I might find, a comforting resolution to a journey that began the same way.

These moments turn into tragic ones so easily – in movies perhaps more than in real life, but perhaps not – that a hint of tragedy hides in every shadow, looms at the margins of every bend in The Road.

I am crossing Neahkahnie Mountain one day when I glance out my rear-view mirror to see the car behind me vanish into a cloud of dust and gravel and plum-

met off the side, at about four-hundred feet above the sea. The moment is the weirdest I have ever experienced in physical space: the car behind me simply vanished, and as indifferently as possible. It seems even to have *sped up* as it rolled into the abyss.

I am certain that I have just witnessed a suicide, a person who for whatever reason (just Now there seem to be many) has decided to roll confidently into oblivion, to End it all while I am watching and helpless.

I stop my truck in a panic along a pullout meant to let faster vehicles pass slower ones on this shoulderless mountain road, and I call 911, to report the horrible

disaster I have just seen.

As I tell the dispatcher what has just happened – without the filter of time and understanding to guide me, and ignoring the dozens of other cars that glide by like nothing has happened, including the car directly behind the one that has gone off the road, as if it really were nothing – I climb back to the scene as fast as my spasming back will allow until I see a man crawling out of the brush, as if the car crash meant nothing to him, too.

He will throw his jacket to the ground when I tell him he is lucky to be alive – as lucky as those I can hear



still trying to claw their way out of the miasma he drove them into – and he will swear and scream red-faced, as if the destruction of his car were the worst thing that has ever happened to him, as if he weren't responsible.

But I soften when I realize the truth of the human nature involved, that we will always lag behind what has just happened to us and will never appreciate how close we came to falling off a cliff and just how close the End was. We'll only ever see the wrecked car smoldering in a ditch and throw our jackets to the

ground in disgust: we'll never be able to see the danger completely clearly until we've passed it.

Elsewhere and elsewhere, one of the few billboards on The Coast beams at me as I round a curve in the road and crest a hill – the four larger-than-life surviving brothers of the Jackson Five smiling confidently back at me, grin-riddled advertisements for a coming concert at an Indian casino. They have ridden the grief back to their safe mid-table position on the B-list lounge act circuit, the great Michael-less (and Latoya-less, for that



matter) Jackson Family Comeback of 2012. I think of the archimimus and the funeral processions of the Romans, of the dead returning to life, and getting up and joining in.

They seem Happy the way middle-aged men can sometimes seem – “we survived.” And good for them. I hope their tour is a success.

Still I lay on the gas pedal hard to zip under the sign before it collapses on me, a thing it might do that suddenly seems perfectly plausible.

Hell, the world might even End.

THE SOURCES OF ENTHUSIASM FOR NATURE

Nature is a balm to the modern conscience not because it never changes, but because it always changes in the same way. It behaves according to its own laws, and it always follows them. Humans always look for their own way first, even if illogical and dangerous, making them the only part of Nature capable of acting unnaturally. There is always one thing I can depend on, and as good as I and the people around me try to be, it is not us.

And there's this, too: Nature always turns out to be right in The End, because it is all that there is out-



side of myself, as far as my eyes can tell. It is the water in which *I* swim, the water in which we all must swim all the time, the unavoidable fact of life in this universe.

It is critical to my own survival that I try to understand it.

They begin life as stout pyramidal shrubs but as their branches grow heavier they begin to adopt weird spirals and contortions of their unrestrained limbs, eventually becoming wholly unique among their species, twisted like shore pines and beautifully weird. They are native to southern Chile, not far from the extreme End of the Americas and Tierra del Fuego. The nuts are palatable and the tree thrives in cool, humid climes near the salty spray of the sea. The species has been around for over sixty million years and may well have survived even the apocalypse that Doomed the dinosaurs.

Each little triangular leaf can live for up to fifteen years and even survive forest fires, becoming crusty brown protective scales after the smoke clears. No one knows how long the trees live. The oldest documented *Araucaria araucana*, or monkey puzzle tree, is four feet in diameter and eight hundred years old.



The trees sprout here and there in backyards up and down The Coast – the sluggishness of their growth and uninsidious tactics of their propagation make them unlikely candidates to ever become invasive – and I always have to slow down when I pass them on the Road or pull over and park my truck and try to figure them out up-close. They fascinate me, occupy my eyeballs utterly, cause me to stare long to figure out just what the hell they really are: truly puzzling to this monkey, at least.

And, of course, they remind me of my father.

What would have been my second summer here became my first summer away from here, the coast having recently become one of impending Doom as I watched my father's illness progress from a distance, feeling especially helpless. On a whim I went to Yellowstone, as Americans are wont to do. Yellowstone reignited my passion for the outdoors after what had been my first of three long, dark winters on the Oregon Coast, along with my joy of photography. Yellowstone jump-started me after a winter mothballed, waterlogged and alone.

I talk to him sometimes when I see something I think



he would like. It's nothing deep – idle chit-chat, really, of the sort we sometimes managed in life – but I imagine he sees me somehow, when my eyes light up and my brow furrows and I become a child again in the face of some fresh marvel offered up by Nature in the course of normal events. I like to think he smirks down at me every time when I run into another monkey puzzle tree, smirks like he knows what is going to happen next.

I imagine that those are moments we both enjoy, closer in death than we were in life and we are *both* wide-eyed kids again, out exploring the world, and we're Friends. Nature is the bond we were seeking between us, of course. It always was, and always will be.

I am here but my father is gone, but only gone in the way the birds' and the bees' and trees' ancestors are "gone," their terminal behavior as much a consequence of a sequence of events as mine is (and will eventually be forever). The crows and jays that flit and screech about me and the trees that tower over me are the same – in a behavioral and physical sense, more or less – as those that did the same for Lewis and Clark, the same as for the Indians.

The same as for my Dad.

I get up early and go for a stroll through a becalmed, predawn campground, the terminal edge of night when the first birds of the day begin to sing, and I inhale deeply and fully. I peel a few flaky layers of papery bark from an arbutus tree, and stroke the impossibly smooth and immaculate flesh beneath and I think of a freshly-husked buckeye. I poke and prod the emerging buds of wildflowers still dripping with dew first thing in the morning, and pick apart rhododendron blos-

soms blade by blade until they are gone. I pluck a few early still-green salmonberries and pop them into my parched mouth.

I dissect pine cones, inspect aphid damage. I act like my Dad used to act without knowing it. I have heard of this kind of thing before: grown men adopting the habits and tastes of their recently-dead fathers, suddenly enjoying the same foods, the same music and artistic sensibilities, even employing the same speech patterns and mannerisms at times. I find myself whistling through my teeth, walking slowly and pointlessly with my arms held behind the small of my back (he also had back spasms, and our shoulders both hunch abnormally, a bequest of genetics – I think holding my hands behind my back redistributes some of the burden from my back muscles to my stomach, as it feels like the load is lighter). I doubt I know what this all means, but I think of the archimimus and the Jackson Family, Big Foot and the Preteen Gangstas, the little oddities of both history and everyday life, and I wonder.

A friendly young man with a dog camps in a site next to me for an autumn weekend. He is eager to start conversations, reads a lot, looks bored. His dog looks bored. When he rolls out in the fog on an early Sunday morning in September – among the last such in a summer full of them – I plunge into a self-pitying depressive event, a morning of fear and loathing and coffee.

I have barely said a sentence to this wandering stranger because I have been too engaged in the work of writing a book. I tell myself this, but the truth is that I have become tired after four years of making an effort, thinking only of myself and this place. I have sacrificed opportunities to meet people (and dogs) both new and potentially interesting because I am staring into

my own navel. And still I stare.

This is a failing point on my journey, a loss in the final moments of The End. My book is nearly finished, but it is all I have to show for four long (longer than I could have suspected) years of effort. I have met many people and have seen unexpected things that have collectively redefined what I ought to expect from the universe, but lasting Friends are the rarest variety, and I have made few. The Road is loneliness, undiluted and cold.

But only at times: most of the time it is a casual romp through the waves, a snooze on a misty beach under a golden sky in late afternoon, and the tingling scent of salt air in wide-open sinuses. It is obsessive-compulsive dogs ripping through the surf in one direction only to mosey back to the start, turn, and rip through the surf again. It is kites in treetops and efforts to knock them down, and toddlers stomping into the sea without fear.

Most of the time, it is Pure Fun.

CLOVER HUNT

I keep my eyes peeled for four-leafed clovers wherever I go. It is a natural outgrowth of my lifestyle – I often find myself outdoors and walking, and with my head turned down, trying not to squash bugs or trying to keep rain off my glasses. It takes no effort, so I do it.

My sister once found a seven-leafed clover. A few days later there was an article in the paper about a local girl about my sister's age who had found a five-leafed



clover – the paper went on and on about how lucky she was. My sister was furious.

My father once told me that four leaves on a clover rather than the regulation three was a genetic mutation, and that when you find one such clover you should look nearby because you will probably find another, as all the clovers in a specific area probably share many of the same genes.

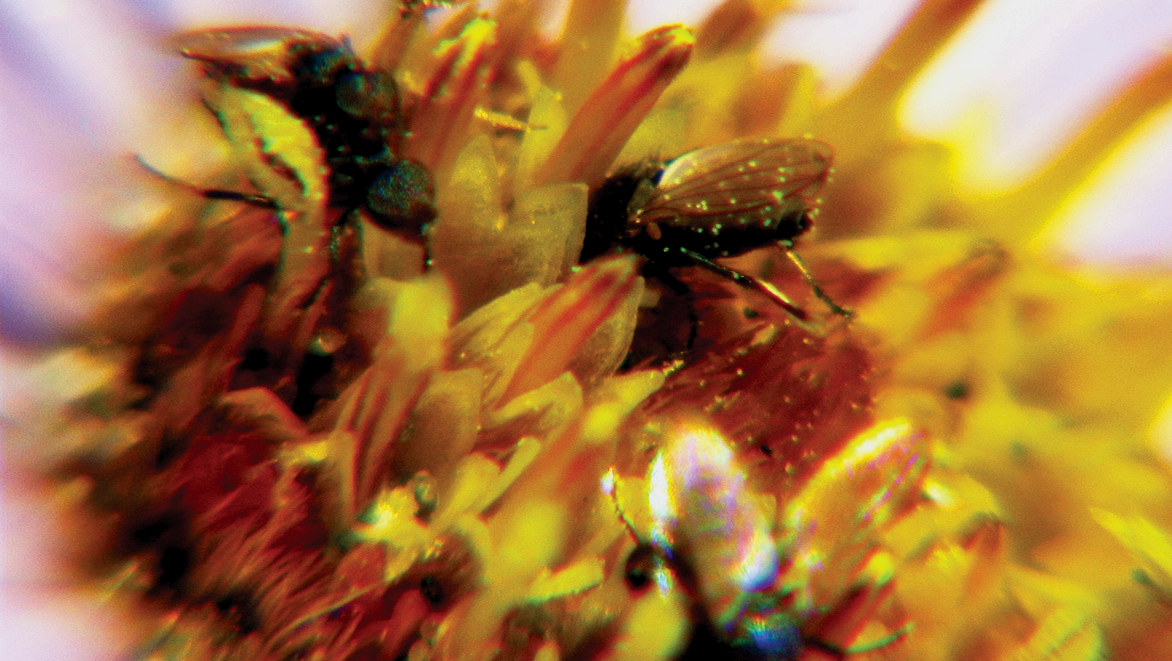
I have for years put my father's theory to the test and I think I can conclude that he was right. Now when I find a four-leafed clover – not lucky enough, I have yet to find a five-leafer *or* a seven-leafer – I leave it where it is, to blossom and go to seed and spread its mutant genes to future generations.

It turns out that the clovers themselves aren't lucky (or they may be – I haven't decided yet), but the plots of ground on which they grow certainly are, for the freaks at least. I've found several such spots on the coast and have returned to them to reconfirm them the following season.

These are *my* lucky spots now, too.

The last time I saw him, my father said he had been worried that I had become dangerously addicted to computer games when I was growing up. I said it was what drove me into programming in the first place, and that he oughtn't have worried. My obsession had ultimately been useful for paying my bills, which presumably is the perceived practical weakness that worried him in the first place. It worked out in The End, I said.

I didn't tell him that I Now loathed computers, and was



trying my hand at writing and photography instead. I don't think it would have surprised or annoyed him. In fact, I think he would have enjoyed reading a copy of my book.

My father was an avid swimmer, as was his mother, who was (and still is, as she approaches the century mark) the person who taught me. I remember that my Dad could stay underwater for an unusually long time. Once when he was going for a deep dive in our swimming pool – mostly to reassure *me*, as I would be going along for the ride and would stay under as long as he did – that the key to remaining submerged for a long time was to refrain from ever panicking, because panic results in a physiological response that causes all available muscles to react with everything they have left, thus using up those available resources.

The thing to do – he advised me as I clung onto his neck for dear life as he pulled us both under – was never to panic.

Fortunes from fortune cookies provide the service of suggesting a completely random way of looking at the world for a few minutes or hours. Sometimes they cause us to ask why that particular fortune has ended up in our hands - exactly what it is supposed to *do*.

I get a lot of fortune cookies that I don't even open, a new one with each cup of hot and sour soup. I once collected a bag with about fifty unopened cookies before I threw them all away a couple years later – I'm still not sure why I was hoarding them.

One day I leave my uneaten cookie on a picnic table, where it is discovered by a racoon. The raccoon that ate my fortune cookie left behind two fortunes – it was a mutant cookie that had duplex prophecies to tell. They read: "Keep your eye open for an opportunity soon to come!" and "Watch for a stranger near you to soon become a friend."

As I finish my book I discover a fortune from a fortune cookie lying on the ground near a parking lot, while I am out wandering aimlessly: "You would do well in the field of computer technology."

Here is my own prophecy, a vision of the future I just made up, a Cookie of Fortune as substantial as the



crunchy, dried crepes we have all convinced ourselves
are somehow lucky, an original arithmatetical proof
based on shaky evidence at best: the Preteen Gangstas
will turn out fine in The End, all of them.

DRIVE-THRU AMERICA AS POETRY

The land around here – the way the mountains of the Coast Range back us up to the sea, as if wanting to keep us here, or the way they require navigation of stupendously steep and winding roads to traverse – really freaks me out sometimes. It is like the driving tour through the Civil War battlefield at Vicksburg, Mississippi, a city that was besieged in 1863 by future president Ulysses S. Grant, its chaotic terrain the result of both the erosive forces of the great river that rolls through it and the months of hand-dug entrenchments made by both armies: the end product a miasmic jigsaw puzzle of bluffs and ravines, trenches, bunkers, and mounds, craters and hollows – a new vignette every few seconds, around every turn, landscapes for shocking sights.

Here, it is the backyards of strangers instead of mere enemies, quick glances down long country lanes and the brief, stabbing flashes of cluttered driveways, flowerbeds through picket fences, bales of hay and barrels of rainwater, cows and horses that flit by as subliminal specters, their ubiquity now a sort of camouflage – they are so startlingly common and close that I am always a little disoriented by their sudden presence, their impulsive cameos here in my dizzy dream-poem.

The exteriors of some houses betray absolutely nothing of their occupants – no evidence of a recognizable personality. Others have no shame whatsoever – an entire kitchen's worth of appliances on the front lawn and spilling around to the sides and back. There is something noble in the lack of shame I see, the way it's all out there, on the surface for all to criticize. "I'm not

ashamed that my neighbors know I have a Miller Lite cargo container on cement blocks behind my barn." Something noble, indeed.

There are such vignettes also on the beach and in campgrounds – the Fun had in campsites that leaves behind such obvious bones – the Fun in action, as it happens: grandparents teaching grandchildren to surf and windsail; the picnics and stoned reveries of youthful mobs; or the old couple combing the beach together with buckets and small shovels, chatting easily as they harvest whatever there is to be had.

The terrain here is epic, hills and the twisty mountain roads offering exceedingly fleeting glimpses at backyards, effects like filmed montages or the flickerings of daydreams: each image close – just outside your car's window – but gone in an instant, to be replaced by another and another and another, like road-tripping some delirious coma, like a quick Sunday drive through the back canyons of the moon: this Road is micro-cosmic and weird – an adventure, a Homeric epic.

It is like reading and reciting a poem, the backyards and driveways the source of the imagery, the Road itself the rhyme and meter. I guess the point of the poem, if there were to be one, would be getting down the mountain without crashing, the interview with the responding officer thick with implications of Peeping Tomism or at least rudeness, a bit tricky to explain without coming off as a pervert or a weirdo.

Still, there is some kind of poetry in this, the poetry of not crashing.

Having grown up in the country, such sappy scenes as



tire swings hung from old oaks and overturned aluminum rowboats on the overgrown edges of still water evoke crystal-clear memories of childhood's impossibly long days and fantastical nights: the sweet-sick smell of your grandfather's abandoned car behind the barn after twenty autumns of leaves and springs of rains have made in the back seat the kind of organic slime in which creepiness thrives, the piles of branches and plywood at the corners of barbed-wire cornfields that no one remembers building; the reckless Fun of bashing in the car's hood and trunk during its sixth summer there, of one fine evening going out with a can of gasoline and igniting all at once the anonymous wood piles, and clothes that stink of smoke, sweat, and oil for weeks afterward, the Scent of the Country.

Some of my most vivid dreams and nightmares take the forms of journeys rendered epic by the shifty nature of reality, warps in the dream's internal plastic logic. In a similar way this Road has scrambled my internal compass, scrambled even my sense of up and down – almost any direction could be north at high noon in the summertime, and the trees and the moun-

tains and rising and falling nature of the Road surface suggest altered rules of physics – Now the mountains are on the left, Now the right, Now straight ahead, from marshy swamplands to the semiarid scrubs on the leeward sides of mountain slopes in a few twisty turns. The experience is uncomfortably close to that of the most tortured Road Trip of my longest winter night's dream, but this is *not* a dream. This is real. And I'm wide awake and alert to the margins of my lane of this odd, shoulderless Road, if only just barely.

Driving into the mountains on logging roads as free rollercoasters, seeking the remote and the weird, seeking whatever happens to be up here, the Need To Know: it's the propellant force that drives me. At its heart, it is always simply this, and it is infinite.

I go as slowly as I can stand to, rolling around corners – a pace just short of stopped in some parts of The Road, stopped outright in others – and using the periodic pullouts to let people zip by me, honking twice – *beep, beep!* – in friendly appreciation, sometimes flipping me off instead.



But I know where I am meant to be, here on the Edge of
this otherwise Endless continent, in the drive-thru lane
of this drive-thru slice – *my* slice – of America.

But then, it's all drive-thru, isn't it?



“What?”

– The Firesign Theatre



EPILOGUE: SLIGHTLY SOUTH OF THE BORDER

Author's Note: While all of the events described in this book actually happened to me, the names and details of characters described in this epilogue have been fictionalized to avoid confusion with real people. In other words, this is what happened, but the only real person in this epilogue is me. – J. B.

Time always runs out.

It is early afternoon in late October and I am struggling to put the finishing touches on my book: fencing with and then wrestling and then bludgeoning this word and that, deciding where to put the final colons and where the semicolons, the agonized minutiae of revision arriving right on time – punctual punctuations. Sid and Torgo snooze on the recliner but Steve paces the spot around the front door of my trailer, ready to go out, anxious and restless to go and desperately needing

to go out. I shush him – I don't have time for nonsense.

Danger lurks in epilogues. I look for a cute way to End my book, a final slam-dunk as time runs out. I may not find one, and not because I have failed but because I am too tired to care about being cute any longer. The Road has worn me to Nothing and then restored me to what I once was and then showed me something New, and there is no time to digest it even as Sid and Torgo stretch their feline bellies and limbs and sink deeper into the cushions like car keys; Torgo begins snoring.

Before I came to the Oregon Coast for the first time, I kept myself in a mild state of ignorance as to what I might find. Lots of people have been here, have explored the region well, and have written plenty of books about it, yet I would approach the place with virgin eyes, by design. In truth, I think I kept myself ignorant partly due to superstition, though I am not and



have never been a superstitious person. The End can be paranoiac to the point of delirium: if I think about it too much, it might not come true.

I have a theory that once you've experienced a place – to be distinguished from having merely visited it – it stays inside you and begins to grow on your surfaces. There are the places where one has grown up and then there are the places one stumbles across in the course of a lifetime, which, it turns out, can be no less pernicious in the irritative sense. I now have permanent longings for places I didn't even suspect existed before I came this way, more or less on a whim – and the attending joy of attempting to satisfy such travel-itches by scratching them again and again. Such is what composes the traveling life (and so approximates a tropical skin condition).

This is perhaps the way that Homes arise from out of the blue sometimes – as if fog-smothered on a far, hazy horizon, an optical phenomenon which often makes of the actual distance a mere illusion – and Home is what I've been searching for. The whole point of having a Home is feeling comfortable within it, like something wanted or at the very least tolerated, recognized as another thing that washed up here too. We're all in – or

more precisely *out* of – the same boat.*

Or we're the kids in the back of the bus and I hold a sign above my head:

SLOW DOWN!

There are other signs I would like to hoist:

MORE PRIVACY FOR ALL!

Or MORE ECONOMIC FREEDOM AND JUSTICE FOR ALL!

Or MORE HOT SHOWERS FOR ALL!

But the sign I hold is the most succinct and therefore the best for the sloganeering I am attempting. Everyone needs to slow down.

Everyone needs to look less at one another (and even less at themselves, either in rose-colored mirrors bor-

* Footnote: The search for a Home ongoing in this book owes something perhaps to the fact that although I have rarely strayed from her borders in almost four years, the state of Oregon refuses to recognize me as one of her own: in other words, I officially don't even live here. Residency requirements include a physical, permanent address. At present, I have no Home state, but I still pay Arizona taxes.



There is always fear involved in trying something New, threats of potential failures that become real when the money runs out. But the aforementioned shortness of life is unfair and aside from eating the right things and watching carefully where one places one's feet, the only way to try to level the playing field is to make the most of the opportunities most of us fail to capitalize on – those of Freedom – and stop waiting for something to happen as if the modern world had your best interests at heart.

Life is too short for fear, this is true: doing Nothing is easier – and scarier.

dered by impossible-tinted neon, or else through murky lenses, too darkly) and begin looking more closely at the physical world around us.*

I am ready to relinquish death as a theme. My death book is done, finished, over. I hereby choose to abandon the rather unhealthy habit of raising a tiny part of life (The End) to a status it doesn't deserve, and therefore too the risk of allowing it to control the whole if I'm not paying careful attention.

Now I want to write mostly about life. I still expect death to come up over and over and over, but I choose no longer to dwell on it.

Life's too short.

* Footnote: If it isn't already beautiful, make it so. Nature herself will do most of the grunt work, trust me. And she is tireless.

My mother complains that none of my photographs have *me* in them, except as shadows or reflections. I have tried the trick of holding the camera at an arm's length and pointing it back at me, but this always results in facial expressions that make it appear as if I am straining to hold a camera at arm's length in front of me. So what I have to tell my mother about it I will tell to everyone: I am a writer and a photographer, and I can think of no profession in which the way I *look* could be less relevant. (And Mom, eventually I'll find a good way to take a self-portrait, and I'll send it to you. I may have to use a tripod.)

A note on shyness and staring, if you don't mind terribly much:

I understand fully why Bigfoot runs away when anyone comes near him unexpectedly. I tend to run away, too, but Now I'm thinking I should approach the peripheries more often, sniff the air and gaze from the bushes of the town at the people therein, to learn what might be learned. I will still haunt the dark woods, to play with

the skookum and lurk under bridges – all a necessity to my lifestyle and my life's work, really – and if you see me at it don't be afraid: I'm more scared of you than you are of me.

But please don't stare. I'm usually working, even when it looks like I'm doing Nothing. If it seems like I am being rude, I am probably instead merely ignoring you, rattling leftover information around in a little box inside my head like the pots and pans that tumble out of their cabinets during a rough patch of *The Road*, calculating improbable equations with little extra processing power to spare. I don't mean to come off like a snob.

And if I turn to hide my eyes, to skitter into the darkness like a paranoid elk, to flee the noise of the knots of humans and their machines, please don't come looking for me. If you caught me by the toe and could get me to talk, I would only redirect you toward the Great Outdoors and slip back into the shadows at the first opportunity.*

Or maybe I only think I'm Big Foot. Or maybe people stare at me like I'm Bigfoot - sometimes maybe take photos and maybe even label them as such (I wouldn't know, would I?) - but I'm just Big Foot, if you get my distinction.

Maybe Them That Stare are doing so out of habit. Maybe they are used to staring all day. Maybe they criticize everything they see because they are used to doing so, talking back to the box within the box they themselves are locked in, immobile on a cushion, thinking nothing

* Footnote: On the other hand, sometimes I really *am* doing nothing. Approach Big Foot carefully but unafraid; use soothing tones and bring gifts.



and doing nothing but staring and criticizing, because what happens inside the little box is real life to them, or as close as they care to get to it - and who can blame the impulse? When at last they leave the box, though, they can no longer see real people because they have made the choice not to; they see TV people instead.

Kill your television.

As for me being Big Foot, please don't ask me about it: it's just my job.

All Silent 'n' Solitary Rock Tours – if this is what mine has been – must End at some point.

When my book is finished I will rent a vacation house in Manzanita for a few weeks to compose my epilogue and ready my book for the printer. It is my symbolic declaration not of victory, but of *The End*, which in my case maybe amounts to the same thing.

In the house, I continue to hug walls and bump into

things because it has yet to occur to me that my available space is no longer as limited as it was before. Even in a house with ample electricity and water I still hesitate before I start the microwave because I'm afraid I'll blow the breaker, and I still minimize my water use (which is incredibly easy once it becomes habitual). With every great gust of wind outside I feel the house shake, rebound, and settle like my trailer would, automatic subconscious physical associations that I fear will never leave me: maybe I will *always* feel houses shake, for the rest of my life.*

Another thing happens: my patterns of consumption begin to change instantly. I suddenly have a dishwasher

* Footnote: This brings to mind a recurrent nightmare – back when I had nightmares, back before I began writing this book – of a skyscraper that teeters in a stiff wind. I am on the top and surrounded by fences that I will cling onto before I at last lose my grip, to fall and wake up in a panic. The skyscrapers of my nightmares are limber to the point of plasticity, and I feel them sway and begin to wobble to one side before swaying and wobbling to the other side slightly more emphatically, before bending nauseatingly back in the original direction – the side I was afraid of falling into when the nightmare began and I first looked down, as in some horrific cartoon – and everything gives way, as if the suggestion of falling has been enough to cause the skyscraper to teeter in the first place.

er and a washing machine that works – I must buy detergent and softener and various other products meant to make my dishes smell nice in the nice-smelling cupboards. My rental microwave is big enough to cook a whole chicken – I must buy a chicken. And so on it goes: a new movie to test out the surround system, cat toys to make the most of the much bigger floor space (which doesn't work: they still sleep all day on beds and chairs), fancy soaps and shampoos for all of the steamy-hot showers I'm suddenly enjoying – *luxuriating* in, actually.

One lick at the lollipop of comfort and convenience and a familiar desire creeps in, indulgent fantasies about what could be accomplished with a wad of cold cash, things that would be so easy and the gratification so instant it would feel like stealing. All it takes is a little more money than I have in my bank accounts and my pockets combined....

Here is a slope that becomes slipperier by merely gazing down it.



My first night in the house a severe thunderstorm rolls over me, and I watch from a balcony, cheering every great crash. I check the radar to see a small storm cell on an otherwise relatively calm night to find it has slammed right into the town. This one has found me at last on this inexhaustible shoreline: this is *my* thunderstorm. The storm knocks out the cable box on my rental television;

I haven't owned a TV in years.*

One afternoon-evening-night when the TV is fixed I vegetate before it until my brain-juice congeals and I find myself criticizing everything I see, and the experience is enough to remind me why I no longer own one. I try to watch a professional football game for the first time in years, but can only get through the first quarter because of all the commercials and penalties – some players are given fifteen yards for brushing past a quarterback who falls down as if in agony. After the call is made he pops right up, smirking. It looks like good work if you can get it.

I try two “music television” channels that no longer play music. Michael Jackson is missing tonight, as if he were a presidential candidate running for office, and I wonder if it is the calm before the storm wherein his image will be regurgitated back at me to get me to buy things I don't want or need, indiscreet messages as carefully plotted as sea-



stacks on a nautical chart, to reassure me that everything is fine and always will be.

Where did the risk go? Where did the Fun go?

I watch people hunting Bigfoot in backyards, obnoxious Seekers who use the non-word “squatch” so often that I feel like punching my rental TV every time that guy says it. They fail to find him in The End, without exception. I also watch programs about Doomsday – this is December of 2012, after all – and am given no new information at all about it, just sensationalist hoo-ha delivered in fearmongering tones, and I at last turn the TV off – to remain off – and waddle down the steps of my rental house to sleep in a rental bed that will not shudder, in a room that does not leak.

And the wind outside is howling tonight.

My rental microwave scrolls the message “ENJOY YOUR MEAL” across the LED when it is finished cooking. I think briefly of Kilgore Trout, and imagine the last word replaced

with the word “LIFE.”

Subliminal microwave messages are a clear indicator of The End of The Road, which seems nigh indeed when the microwave beeps three more times yet again, to remind me that I have been reflecting on Microwave

* Footnote: The last thing I watched was Obama's first inaugural, and his second is coming up in a few weeks: I may or may not watch it.

Philosophy – “I excite atoms therefore I am” and “It is the machine itself that causes the thing inside of it to get hot and fully cooked” – for exactly two minutes.

Unending sameness is as rough on the psyche as chaos – they have to be tempered and mixed together to make one Happy. Months locked inside a trailer and working in isolation – the supporting role of my cats must again be mentioned here – has left me with a surplus of the former and led me to seek to add a few tiny crumbs of the latter, a few sparse extra grains at The End.*

Sometimes one finds oneself doing things with vague reasons, trying things just to see what will happen, to see if they can be gotten away with. Boredom plays a role, too. And restlessness. It is the same kind of thing that causes us to open an Unknown book and begin reading, the very seeds of the exploratory human impulse. Like kicking tires, I’m not entirely sure what I am looking for. Something to come loose, perhaps.

It is like pushing a new sports car to the redline and then holding it there. Besides, I have had no run-ins with the law on my journey and am a little ashamed of the fact. I need a blemish if only for the sake of posterity, to have something exciting to tell strangers someday. I need a small mistake that can be inflated to tall-tale proportions as needed. I tell myself that these are all good reasons to do it – to go to Arcata in California’s

* Footnote: Actually, I only *think* it is The End. Here is a problem with full-time travel: the problem of stopping. At the time of the events described here, in this flashback embedded in an epilogue and explained in a footnote, I don’t yet know that I still have over a year to go, that before I can finish my long trip I will finish a book that for the time being is little more than a faint glimmer on the horizon, nothing really but a few volumes of scribbled notes and a few hard drives clogged with unsorted images.

Emerald Triangle, slightly south of the border in temporary Humboldt County – or good *enough* at any rate.

The California-Oregon border is one of those fairly rare places in The United States where the atmosphere noticeably changes on the other side. Texas and Utah and Florida also have major mood shifts along their seams, in all of which state law-making power is considered sacrosanct, as a more-than-necessary bulwark against the power of the federal government. But it is more than just laws that change, it seems to me. The attitudes and lifestyles seem different, with different issues of concern that are easily blundered into by the unwary, targets of loathing and resentment and soft-spots of regional pride discovered by accidental faux pas. The time scales are all relative, too. California, for instance, operates at a speed well beyond that of light itself, and yet at the same time is considered by outsiders to be “mellow.” Of this last I see little evidence – along the roads at least – except in a few sleepy, elk-trod villages.

For one thing, Highway 101 opens onto a broad, flat plain upon crossing the border, after having slithered along dramatic hair’s-breadth cliffs all the way from Port Orford. The road is straight until passing Crescent City, where it twists into the northern reaches of the redwoods.** The pace of traffic instantly jumps on reaching the California line. After lazily tracing the shores of Oregon the road becomes a relatively bland, open thoroughfare in manicured farm-and-pasture land, as if the dream has ended and it is time to wake up to hard facts. This is true only as long as one discounts the pos-

** Footnote: The extreme northern limit is actually in Oregon. A short drive inland from Brookings takes you to a little pocket grove of them, a quick day-trip for those badly in need of a big-tree fix. I wish there were more of these.

sibility of turning around again, going back to the start one more time like a rollercoaster in reverse, starting a new dream aimed more-or-less directly at Polaris.

Keep going forward though and the wind in your face and bugs on the windshield can be refreshing, and upon entering the redwoods, 101 becomes weirder still. The gigantic trees crowd the shoulder of the road – in some places there is no shoulder – and the effect is of slaloming through a herd of King Kongs (or maybe that should be “Kings Kong”). Then the road becomes a near-interstate, all cloverleafs and medians as it approaches the old, weirder-than-weird city of Arcata.

The atmosphere in downtown Arcata is at first quaint and open, lots of motion and smiling. After fifteen or twenty minutes alone in such a place, though, the air quavers with something else that says “a lot of people are getting screwed here,” that you better keep a tight grip on your things because they are going to be taken away from you if you stay here long. The effect is like being in the center of Now, the center of all of the tensions in society made bare and raw. Or it could be that I’ve been living in rural campgrounds among flowers and birds and am a little freaked out by all the “hippies” suddenly around me.

The air is tense, or I am tense, or both. I didn’t expect so much unbridled commerce around Arcata Square, all of it indoors, where credit cards are accepted and expected. Every sidewalk is like the bathroom of a movie theater, fuzzy and sticky. The hipsters here are too hip to call themselves such. Besides, they are only shopping, and *all* money is hip, not just cash. I awkwardly walk compulsory laps around the mall, repeatedly pretending to be interested in crap I can’t afford and don’t really want.

But then, you know what shopping is like.

What brings me here is a question: is it possible for me take total control over my own health and lifestyle? Am I allowed in this free land to decide for myself where my help comes from and what form it takes, or must I take only the wrecked system on offer?

Ever since my run-in under the bridge with Arlen the Drifter, the topic has been on my mind. There is a mistaken perception that everything operates as it is supposed to in the world into which we are born, that someone somewhere (probably in Washington, D.C.) is in charge of it all. This viewpoint may be necessary for children to begin to understand it, but many of them will never be disabused of the notion by the time they’ve grown up – it depends on who your parents are, and how quickly you catch on. Some grow into adulthood still expecting to find a genuine wizard at the controls of society, but in *this* country – Oz or something like it – only the flying monkeys are real.

In other words, if we are to be left on our own to comfort ourselves, I draw the line at being told how to do it. To the poor and those without health insurance like me the so-called War on Drugs – more precisely, the carry-on effects of its arbitrary justice – results in nothing but contempt for a hypocritical law, and contempt for one breeds contempt for all, and here is where the system goes off the rails entirely.

So I’ve come looking for the best weed I can find because I’ve heard it can relax my muscles and end my lower back’s recurrent spastic reactions – back spasms are occupational liabilities for photographers, money floating away in the breeze – or at least mitigate them until I can afford surgery, and because Henry David

Thoreau said that unjust laws require acts of civil disobedience to be revealed as such.*

The disobedience is symbolic, of course. Cannabis virtually *is* legal around here. In fact, I've boldly chosen the safest place to try to score weed probably in all of America.

There is one other reason I am here. Aside from back spasms and lack of health insurance, Arlen the Drifter and I both share outsider status in Oregon, in that neither of us are officially residents. This means that we couldn't obtain medical marijuana cards even though we would both seem to be in the right place and with the right qualifying conditions.

The law excludes us both by default (excludes Arlen twice, taking the economic angle into account). In order for us to benefit from this particular law in any way, shape or form, we must break it.

He said his name was Henry Jones, although I didn't ask for one. Now he's having me empty my pants pockets into the dashboard cup-holders; I pull fists of car keys and a lighter and some lint and paper and stuff them into the little indentations in the molded plastic. He made me sit in the driver's seat of his cargo truck for some reason, to keep a close eye on me and not

* Footnote: This situation would seem to be a very special case. The origins and arguments behind marijuana prohibition in the United States are as flimsy as those of the Spanish-American War and stem from many of the same gentlemen – making the topic another good candidate for a doctoral thesis. Also, here's another free tip: when in doubt, blame good old H. D. Thoreau.



have the steering wheel as an obstacle if he needs to make a break for it, perhaps.

Part of my plan in Arcata is to be bounced around like a pinball for the adventure of it, but I didn't expect to run smack into the bald facts of city life so directly, a home run in my first and last and only-ever attempt at investigative journalism, a task for which I suddenly find myself ill-equipped the moment Henry Jones appears to be reaching for something on the passenger-side floor, all the while keeping his eyes locked solidly onto my own. (It turns out that his ankle itches.)

Henry habitually pats the back of an unkempt mop of frazzled black hair on the back of his head while his beagle puppy laps at some dark stain in the back seat of the cargo truck, beyond which is a mat and pillow on a bare few feet of plywood floor, the rest of it being taken by boxes of books, knickknacks (I imagine they are cherished keepsakes, but they could just be recycled dumpster refugees), and piles of soiled clothes. "The roof leaks like a cheap squirt-gun when it rains," Henry will tell me.

For now I try to convince him that I'm not a cop – an assumption that people younger than me always make that annoys me more with every passing year, and something that needs to stop – and talk him down, as he's stoned silly on the little clump of cannibutter he's been gnawing at under a freeway overpass, the only place he would agree to meet me. I get him talking about his personal philosophy, a thing that always works with bum-trippers.

"I can see peoples' auras. You have a bright, blue one," Henry tells me, and I'm Happy to learn it. He strokes a piece of Unknown fur – an old pet turned to a favorite pelt, perhaps? – and bangs on a little drum that calms him down until my unorthodox and totally unprepared interviewing tactics raise his suspicions again, but I'm not playing any games – I'm babbling to stall for time and because I'm still a little apprehensive about what *else* he might be storing around the floor in here.

Tension is created in public speech by politicians and pundits who attempt to vilify various groups of people, who cast wild aspersions as truth, inject hatred into their speech and couch it as reasonable rhetoric. It is in public speech that it first appears and begins to metastasize until the group is thoroughly vilified, a process that is only catalyzed by the Internet. Once vilified, it is no longer necessary to be fair to them, and if they don't have money they can be simply ignored.

Henry is no less a human being for his situation. He even seems bright in brief glimpses through his inarticulate haze, like owl's eyes reflecting dayglo yellow in foggy treetops. This person doesn't deserve the ostracism the unspoken questions in his wide but unfocused, near-sighted (or perhaps hind-sighted) owl's eyes suggest he is getting, from almost everyone.

He is pushed to the margins of society under the assumption that he will be unable to do any harm there. But it is from the margins that rampages come, from people who have been cast off and cut loose to drift alone. I don't know the details of Henry's story; I only see him as he is Now. I know – or imagine I know – where he is, but can only guess how he got here. I can speculate too on where he is going.

One thing seems evident about Henry – he will not get stuck in a spiral of indentured consumerism, at least not yet. Or perhaps he has already been there, but I'm betting he won't go back. There are advantages to his lifestyle that he probably doesn't understand or appreciate, but a transient lifestyle is one that guarantees new opportunities and attitudes with each new day in a new place. I would like to say that Henry Jones will be fine.

In other words, if he's a Gangsta at all, he's a post-snap one and not a pre-snap one, meaning that he's fairly innocuous. This doesn't mean that he can't still fall off an Edge, though. Pitfalls are still everywhere. (It should be noted that I don't have a little brother, and I don't have any children. Maybe this plays a role in how I interpret events.)

The government's stated purpose is to ensure life, liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. To Henry Jones it is a predatory beast, out to get him, out to find a way to trap and cage him. Why "the government" would be out to get him (or anyone like him) is a question shrouded in mystery and fear, and one I do not know well enough to answer. But if I committed a crime deemed bad enough by society, the government – i.e. the politicians and appointees who collectively compose the government – would be out to get me, too, to draw for the public a specter of evil incarnate, and a lowly worm fit only

for being crushed under a boot: cheap, angry words in exchange for easily-impressed votes.

The paranoia begins to seem less insane and more justified. Henry is paranoid, it is true. But it is a paranoia he shares with millions, both those like him and those who neither know nor care that he exists.

I wonder sometimes at the way people collide, clash or click into one another like billiard balls in a combination shot. A chain of accidental collisions and disjointed connections – most between strangers – led me to Henry, who is in need of money to get him out of his cargo truck and into a dry apartment with a real bed. And my back really hurts and I'm bored – that's why I'm here. Let's make a deal.

This ought to be an easy transaction between free citizens. Instead it writhes with fear and misplaced resentment, drawn taut with weird tension like a string bent too sharply on a violin. How could something so natural and harmless become a situation in which I fear for my life and my neighbor's sanity? Here's another question: how could the people in Henry Jones' life allow him to reach this place? Does anyone care about him?

Henry doesn't elaborate much about the forces he thinks are out to get him, but I imagine something in his family life seems to him unbearable, which is why he thinks he is here – but he's not necessarily rushing toward enlightenment like he supposes. He is rather running *from* something – the fear in his eyes is real.

I guess he has had run-ins with the law before – this is part of why he seems so terrified of me, maybe he's on parole – and has already asked all of his friends for help (and those of his family he feels comfortable asking, at least so far). But he's not sleeping on the floor of a car-

go truck for fun, only because he's run out of options.

Henry is a logical outgrowth of total freedom, a vestigial limb that comes to life suddenly and semi-randomly, and a limb made of perfect cynicism. I'm not the only one experimenting here. Whatever has driven him to this point, he is here now, and is baffled and annoyed to find that total freedom is hollow; it is so because he lacks the skills and self-reliance such a lifestyle requires unless the laws of the universe are overturned and strangers start giving more of themselves than he ever ought to have suspected.

At his age, he is learning the difference between dreams and realities, things I'm startled to find that I already know. At some point, I learned these lessons as he is trying to learn them, on my own. An infinity of warnings I would like to issue go unsaid because I know they will go unheeded, but it is a long, hard Road, and he has miles to go before he sleeps.

The lesson isn't born of wisdom or even experience, but only of exhaustion.

Henry tells me he is planning to leave the city – he has only been here a few days, so possibly he's just as weirded-out by the place as I am – and that the money I give him for what I assume is lousy ditchweed – it is not – will help him find a good place. He says he is sick of people and just wants to live in the wild for a while. I tell him he should get out of Arcata but stay on The Coast, maybe go north. I'll never find out or try to find out what happened to him (my journalistic career Ends here, a Happy Ending for all concerned) but I like to think the old axiom about a fool and his money worked out in his favor this time.

I won't make sense of many of these things before the

book ends. Time has run out, The End is nigh and I am tired (this is the epilogue, after all). I won't regret any of them, though, not because I have chosen them but instead because they have shaped and formed me, carved into me and conspired to give me my accessories, part of my look and feel, not part of who I am but the first, most essential part. How could I get rid of them, and how could I summarize them, knowing that?

The End is here and it seems to go nowhere special: just more of the same, just another joy ride through the same unfenced field except that this time we know we're not going anyplace we haven't chosen for ourselves. I wonder what happens if the world doesn't end on time as expected. I hope we won't blame one another for the fact that we are Ending up nowhere especially New on the other side of Doomsday. We're all floating free in our own courses but rushing in a common current – we should be nothing but pleased when we encounter fellow survivors floating alongside us.

Henry reminds me of me in an alternate but nearby universe. That is why I'm concerned: he reminds me of me. This is where the common ground between any two people always lies, an ultimate common denominator with no remainders, a prime number as easily expressed as a handshake or a smile (or a middle finger, for that matter) – simple, honest, two-way communications between strangers and neighbors in Nature, without bullshit.

At least he has his beagle puppy. I don't think I would have made it to the End of the Road intact if not for my cats, not because there is anything special about them – they are Magic, but only Fuzzy Magic, which is not to say Fuzzy Magic is nothing – but because I can pretend for a while that I am a responsible person. It is another game I play with myself to convince myself

that someone is dependent on me and so it is important that I get out of bed in the morning.

Henry Jones asks me for a succinct man-hug before I leave, and I can feel his hands on my back, still searching for wires or a weapon.

A few weeks after I return to Oregon from Arcata I will go looking for Arlen the Drifter near the original bridge under which I found him, to share my discoveries about the ability of cannabis to soothe back spasms, or at least render them irrelevant for a while. In truth, perhaps, I just want to talk about turtles again. We could just chat about whatever comes to mind.

I will return a few more times to locate him, looking for him under bridges as if *he* were the turtle, waiting for him and not finding him – he is a drifter, after all – and at last roll out of the parking lot and over the bridge, roll back onto 101, my Mother Road, rolling back into the world.

Meantime, people continue to snap like twigs. Massacres are routine Now. I read about them in the news when I'm not too repulsed by the possibility – nee, the probability – to look. What is happening?

I think it is the same thing that has always happened to people, who have always snapped like twigs. They just do it more often Now: there are more twigs around, and more careless people to step on them.

The predatory nature of society is New. There are a number of factors at work, but language is always the birthing-room of predatory impulses, the place that they are nurtured and refined. That so many otherwise sound people have become parasites and carni-

vores – cannibals, actually – in their speech is partially due to the liberating nature of Internet speech – and the near-perfect cover it provides for sneak attacks and easy thefts, screening the attackers like invasive grasses hide a fox – and partially due to a backlash against such speech, a normal knee-jerk response to having one's deepest beliefs and understandings challenged at every turn by total strangers skilled at using language as a weapon (and this happens to everyone venturing online, no matter who they might be).

A closed mind in the presence of completely free speech makes one both too nosy and too defensive. A good way to counteract these particular effects of Internet speech on public speech – Internet speech *is* public speech but with a crucial difference, that of physical space in which to talk (or punch) face-to-face, which is the natural, native habitat in which the Founders found free speech when they protected it – is to further open rather than attempt to close one's mind, the difference being the same as that between a color photograph and one rendered in monochrome, which typically only works when there is a natural contrast in the subject anyway.

Ignoring the loudmouthed jackasses amongst us is always a good option, too.

Whilst researching The End of the World online, I stumble across an article that describes Mayan art and utensils crafted to resemble various plants that they harvested from Nature and used medicinally: clay buckets adorned like the bark of the favored ceiba tree, coffee mugs decorated with the leaves and blossoms of a plant they used to flavor beverages, et cetera. From this, natural historians can deduce which plants the Maya considered sacred, a process that might eventual-

ly cause chemists to ask themselves what attracted the Maya to the plants to begin with. New medical therapies could be discovered in the plants that might help people in the here and Now, the Natural Wisdom of the ancients unlocked by art and human curiosity (and the passage of time, which is the only reason historians are interested in the Maya at all, and the perfectly normal apprehension about The End of the World that they are claimed to have proposed, which is what caused me to begin clicking my mouse in the first place).

If any useful chemicals are discovered in the process, they will be incorporated into pills and sold at exorbitant prices to people with health insurance, very few of whom will have any idea that the sources of the drugs are Natural.

To their customers, it will seem as if the pharmaceutical companies are made of magic.

I am working on a jigsaw puzzle at a card table set up in a corner of my trailer on election night 2012. The puzzle is a thousand-piece replica of an antique world map. The election coverage streaming over my wireless data card is background noise, really. Baseball season is over, and I've listened to the albums I own so many times that I think I will vomit or pass out if I don't get something New on this night, what turns out to be re-election night, the closest that this nation often is able to get to a collective expression of contentment, or at least pseudo-informed consent.

The votes stack up in the incumbent's favor as I click the puzzle pieces that compose the equator into place – the northern and southern hemispheres are easier to distinguish from one another after this little red line is finished – but I glance at my computer during the four

minutes it takes after the polls close to determine how Oregon – which hasn't voted Republican since 1984 – voted this time.

I only get the something New that I seek when one of the talking heads says that Colorado has just approved a referendum making the sale and consumption of cannabis legal within its borders.

I have spent the past year with my face buried in a book. I haven't been paying attention, but now that I have been jolted away from my card table I check a few other states – Oregon's similar measure failed to pass but not Washington's (I had completely forgotten one of them and didn't even know about the other). On hearing the results, a singular thought occurs and repeats itself in my mind:

This is New.

I've saved one anecdotal nugget about Nature for the epilogue.

I am on an empty trail beside a stream on a beautiful autumn day. I sit down on a bench hewn from a fallen log, pull out my notebook and pen, take a sigh, and stare at the horrible blank paper.

I am trying at last to come up with a title for my book, a thing I have waited until fairly late in the game to attempt. For months my book has been an untitled project, noted in my notebook with some vague sentiment, like "OR book" or "travel book" or just with asterisks indicating each topic, as it is assumed I will know which writing project I am talking about – the one I've been working on for the last many months – when I read the notes.

My earliest attempts at a genuine title are weak. The afternoon's efforts suggest titles that would be twelve to eighty words long, and two or three additional subtitles that would be even longer: I'm so far into the process that I'm having deep trouble knowing where I am while I'm simultaneously trying to summarize a book that is largely outlined but only partially written. The whole process is grueling in its middle portions, like a Broadway musical.

When writing a book, the world of the book is often all that matters. The external passage of time means little – more measurements and relativity and ultimately, mathematics, again – and people age and environments change around you and you remain locked in the same several thousand words all the while, like a stuck rock in a stream. This is another aspect of a full-time-camping lifestyle that has both its rewards and its pitfalls: the constant motion results in constant revision of behavior, thought, and mood, but the perpetual fury around you makes it hard to concentrate.*

My attention is drawn – it is impossibly easy to draw at the moment, by virtually anything – to another eye-stabbingly-blue Steller's Jay alighting on a branch on a tree on the other side of the stream between us. It squawks a few times, screeches like a little darling – hello little birdie! – then silently pivots its head, the action so commonly found in Nature that it reminds me of the unconscious dribbling of basketballers driving to a wide-open hoop, just checking things out, seeing what's what, impossibly cool and bright blue and not

* Footnote: It is wildly random in its particulars, but ultimately I think travel benefits the writing process if done right, acting as a wedge to offset the time-locking effect of writing itself: it's never good to be anything – even a rock – if you're stuck in the same mud for too long.

having anything to do with the work I am meant to be doing so I keep watching and watching, waiting for inspiration to strike.

It plants and turns its pivoty head at me – directly *at* me, a hard, dead-on tap to a funny bone encoded in my genetics and instinctive to me and all living creatures that tells me when another living thing is looking my way (and my human eyes are good enough to see the details and my human brain good enough to interpret them such that there can be no doubt as to what the bird is looking at) – and *meows* three times, a distinct kitten’s meow that makes two syllables of the word the way Torgo does when he’s anxious.

I have come here to escape the peeling, water-stained interior walls of my trailer, to escape a sameness similar to that which drove me *into* the trailer to begin with. I have stormed out of a Home that is driving me insane – such that I will wonder myself about my own mental state when I return, to be sure I didn’t just imagine what happened while I was gone, and I will conclude that I didn’t – to get some work done. The thing that at last drove me out the door were my cats, who had meowed with such whiny petulance as I was erecting the screen room around the slideout – as a gaggle of Steller’s jays that inhabit that particular corner of the park flitted in the treetops overhead, observing all, members of an entire extended family of Steller’s jays in a park I shall leave unnamed here so as to return someday, to resume in privacy the conversation here started between these jays and me – and then once again after they had climbed out the window and jumped into the screen room, that I had briefly bellowed at them in this near-empty campground, a little tirade about the importance of patience and waiting a fucking minute for fuck’s sake, a tiny enraged rant flung at my three old, pathetic, just-as-tired-as-I-am cats, before I stomped out

the door and down this trail, notebook in hand. (This too may play some role in the difficulty I am experiencing while trying to name things.)

The jay doesn’t do much in the aftermath of its performance – for all I know, it will never meow again. It seems bored with a lack of reaction that may be because I am immobile and slack-mouthed, unable to write or take a photo, unable to do much but watch it flit away toward some other game to play or raving fool to mock, whatever cruel mind-trick it is playing.

Maybe it’s not that hard to figure out. Or maybe I’m trying too hard to force it all to make sense.

Ultimately, I don’t know what sense to make of the meowing Steller’s jay – apparently they do that. Apparently too, their sense of timing – whether it is Fun or cruelty or both that they are attempting – is impeccable.

The title I ended up with *is* a little misleading I suppose – truer in its subtitle than its title – because this book isn’t really about camping or history (or me) at all. I made it about the place, as I wanted. There is plenty more to tell about travel and camping, but it will have to wait for another book; this one is about to End.

To get me out of bed for school when I was a teenager, early in the morning and in the black of an Indiana winter, my father had a technique whereby he burst into my room, flipped on the light, and tore the layers of blankets to which I clung from my grasp and dumped them into the hallway before I could react. Frugal to the point of atrocity, my father kept the house a temperature normally seen only in garden thermometers, such as where dangle slowly trickling icicles. He knew that I would have to crawl out of bed in my underpants

to get my blankets back, a thing that surely would at least semi-wake me and eventually get me on my uncoordinated feet – and perhaps he guessed too that I would trip or stub my toe at some point in my delirium, throwing me into a rage, thus waking me further, et cetera. My father was a devious bastard in his way.

He would call something to me when he had successfully performed this maneuver, something thrown over his shoulder as he strode victoriously out of my room.

“Rise and shine!” he would sometimes say, a variant on his much more common “Up and at ‘em!”

So I say clearly in response Now what I never had the moral fortitude to do anything but mutter sarcastically to him then, a thing I would like to have said when he told me never to panic, a thing I hope never again to stop saying when it is time to wake up: “I will try, Dad.”

I’ll try.

One reason I hope my appearance doesn’t matter is because I have bad front teeth – a bequest of my half-English genes, perhaps.* This means that my head – my eventual skull, the long-held smile that everyone ultimately leaves the world to remember them by – will forever have minor dental structural flaws, at least until it too turns to dust and ash to become something else someday.

However Natural, this is nonetheless disturbing to contemplate. Why is that?

Some days are unlucky. Or maybe I myself am unlucky on those days, or else there is some unlucky alchemical reaction between the elements on certain days, but it is easier just to call such days unlucky in and of themselves and be done with it.

Day One of this whole traveling thing turned out to be one such unlucky day, when among other catastrophes my truck’s fatally clogged arteries – the fuel injectors were all choked in what would turn out to be a terminal illness, followed by a four-thousand-dollar resurrection – would cause it to stall on the very first hill.

The day The End arrives – December 6, 2012 – is unlucky before it even begins. A rare nightmare wakes me at four in the morning, a rolling slumber from which Doom rises like shadows from the still corners of my mind, rising up weedlike through cracks in the pavement. Put another way, my subconscious feeder streams are contributing rivulets of images to the main, conscious current, causing it to flood when I awaken. I stumble, still dripping of fantasy-Doom, up the steps of the house, cursing, a sharp left turn at the top – tripping over cat toys and cursing all the more – to the coffee-maker hidden in a nook under some cabinetry.

The little toe on my right foot beams up at me, throbbing and puffy and the approximate color and size of a gherkin, a reminder of last night’s attempt to kick Sid out of my way – the cats still walk directly underfoot, a thing that they had to do when we were all living in the trailer but now that there is plenty of room seems deliberate – and instead kicked a baluster, breaking that

* Footnote: As an American, I am only partially aware of where I came from or how I got here, but here I am.

oft-broke toe yet again.*

The details of Washington state's Initiative 502 mean that today marijuana is legal to use and sell within the borders of the state. The other details are very sketchy; it will take a year for the state's lawmakers to work out the procedures for taxing and selling the product in stores, and the conflicts with federal law have to be sorted out. Once this is done, I predict Washington and Colorado will both be flush with cash; in the meantime, those with entrepreneurial skills and good connections are going to make a fortune.**

Today, The End, is one of the secular holidays that I will choose to celebrate. I will drive to Vancouver, Washington for one of the easiest transactions of any sort I've ever been party to, and return Home without sampling my tempting purchase, all of it nice and legal and nobody hurt: Pure Fun – except, of course, for the aforementioned unluckiness.

In preparation for the long drive I clog my MP3 player with songs – too many of them, so that the machine will no longer boot, even connected to my laptop. It just says: “NO ROOM FOR MUSIC – PLEASE FREE

* Footnote: I've lost track of the number of times I've broken or fractured my two little toes, a problem for which doctors can do nothing but give you painkillers and ice. This is surely a result of my habit of walking around barefoot combined with my preference for subdued (or nearly-extinguished) lighting in the evening time and far into the wee hours, making me groggy in the mornings.

** Footnote: In the End, I expect marijuana to be legalized nationwide (although some states will undoubtedly keep or create prohibition laws for themselves – unless such laws are struck down as unconstitutional, which at this point would be profoundly ironic) because a debate will presently follow in the nation in the course of which the proponents of prohibition will have to explain the reasons for their opinions, the arguments why weed should be illegal to begin with. I don't believe that they will be able to do this.

SPACE” and something phrased even more stupidly before shutting itself off – a thing I would like to do whenever it pleased me, too – having been force-fed digits to a point of eternal suffocation. The lousy little box has been my constant companion throughout this weird trip and it dies forever on this last day – Day One Thousand Five Hundred and Twenty-Eight – to become a dark, metal-and-plastic brick, a paperweight.***

(Moreover, my backup MP3 player will soon “upgrade” its firmware automatically when I connect it to my computer, which is attached to the Internet, after which it behaves differently: the forward and back buttons no longer work on some tracks, and they have introduced a “resume from start” or “resume from previous point” feature that wasn't there before, upsetting my ingrained behavior, as if the buttons on your favorite remote control were suddenly reordered and they did different things Now. When all consumer products – jeans, pens, shoes, hats, toilet paper, toothbrushes and floss, food, sexual aids and everything else – are embedded with wi-fi chips and given orders at the factory to automatically “upgrade” themselves forever, how maddening might daily life become? Who is in charge of my life at that point?)

On the drive over the Coast Range I run on fumes into the peripheries of the Portland metro area, and one of the two batteries in my truck dies in transit only to come back to life only to die again, et cetera. The

*** Footnote: A program built into my PC's operating system attempted to automatically synchronize with my MP3 player, scrambling the data on the drive and corrupting the file system such that it can no longer be booted, and the reformatting feature doesn't work as described in the manual. I avoided using the built-in software on my computer until today, my first and last attempt, and the last chance. Now come and gone for my operating system's maker – a final straw, and an inmate escaped from their MicroPrison® forever.



battery warning light in my dashboard beams Doom at me, then forgets it for a while, then beams more Doom. There must be a short wire somewhere but still I breathe shallowly every time it is on. Even though I'm not towing my trailer, I am alone in this place: any breakdown is a *real* breakdown.

On the way Home from Washington I get lost in Portland in a pounding rain and end up driving all the way around it. This has happened to me before. Once during rush-hour (which seems to last all day in Portland, just like the precipitation) I was towing my trailer with my kayak strapped to the roof of my truck, on my way to the Columbia River Gorge for a week of world-class hiking trails and waterfalls. The front strap holding the kayak to the truck came loose at seventy miles per hour and it swiveled around the remaining connection in back, whipping wildly and battering the cockpit of my truck until I could get from the middle lane (I call it the "coward's lane" when I'm in it) over to the far right median to stop and reattach it. But I've been more precisely *here* before, too, where I am today: lost in the rain and driving an indecisive half-circle around Portland for a few hours. (This isn't necessarily Portland's fault – a few hours in any big city and my brain gets as mushy and soft as any November blackberry.)

I take a direct route off the highway once I get back into the Coast Range, a route that takes me right where I want to be but does so about as inefficiently as possible – this Road bends back on itself like a ten-foot millipede in a blind panic – through a landscape that alternates between clear-cuts and the diseased, snag and stump-speckled first-growth forests that always replace them.

Ominous forms are everywhere in the mid-afternoon darkness, shifting near the wobbly margins of their

own fog-warped silhouettes as my headlights – one of them is off-kilter as a result of a deer collision during my first month of travel, causing it to beam off to the side, like a ghastly spotlight into peripheral illusions – illuminate the little details as the fuzzy light sweeps over them, images ticking by as in a clock except that in the night it is impossible to see beyond them: only the closest things are visible, but these only as shiftily phantoms, and are seen only for a quick fraction of a second.

I keep an eye out for Big Foot but I find only skookum, which pop out at every twist in the potholed road. The skookum are everywhere tonight. I almost run right off the shoulderless road when a frog leaps through my headlight beams, causing me to swerve – I miss hitting him, and do not crash, yet again.*

The ease with which I can forget the lessons I have learned on The Road – why I wrote them in my notebook to start with – is restated to me in The End, whispered into my ear yet again as a cautionary tale and a warning of potential Doom by my cat Steve F-180, who when I get Home in the dark, wet night takes the opportunity I give my cats for a moment on the back balcony to jump through a temporary barrier I have made of a plastic chaise lounge and skitter flabbily down a twenty-foot wooden staircase leading to the lower-level back door. Steve's night out: in my stupid haste to recapture him, I bumble in bare feet down wood that in

this season I ought to know will be coated in a pervasive patina of slime and algae. The perpetually-polished bottoms of my feet will find no purchase if I move with anything but extreme caution – I ought to know this.

I am fortunate to be holding onto the handrail when my feet go out from under me, but unfortunate to kick instinctively in an attempt to reclaim my footing and thus send my already-broken little toe Edge-first into yet another wooden baluster in this house of sudden pain, shattering it into oblivion. It involuntarily squirts blood from under the toenail because of the pressure. An X-ray would reveal nothing but a little side-bag hanging from my foot, protruding at an unnatural angle and with little chips of bones floating inside it.

It is at this moment that I realize that The End is not an unlucky day, nor am I unlucky today, but I've simply forgotten everything I've learned for a little while, twenty-four-hour temporary insanity, unplanned. All day I've been rushing to do things, to meet other people's expectations of how fast or slow I should be doing them – it's a reasonable expectation quite often, such as when I am in their way – but I've been at warp-speed since the nightmare that pulled me out of bed so early this morning and haven't taken five minutes to check my speed with what I've long since established is *my* speed. That's why I fall: I'm going too fast for myself.

My pulverized toe really isn't the problem it first seems. It's my *little* toe. Like my father's missing digits, my little toe has educated me – I need it no more than he needed the toes he hacked off with the lawnmower blades that at least taught him a lesson about Nature, too – about going too fast. And they say nothing ever happens twice.

Now I almost kick over a plate-glass tabletop because

* Footnote: This summer a group of kids placed a hypnotized bullfrog that I *didn't* miss into the road in front of me, on the lane opposite the one in which they were strolling. I moved into that lane to give them room and didn't see the bullfrog lying upside-down on the road until I had run over it. I looked in my rearview mirror to see one of the older boys – a Preteen Gangsta amongst them, and undoubtedly the lead conspirator – raise his fist in triumph as I drove over it.



I am trying to keep my bleeding, swollen toe elevated; my most-expensive camera sits on the opposite side of the table, making it somewhat unbalanced on that side.

So rather than tempt outrageous fortune any further, I end the day by running out the clock, flat on my back and with a baggie of ice balanced precariously on my little toe, foot propped on the cushion of the couch, enjoying my purchase while watching boxing on TV for an indeterminate amount of time – the safest thing I’ve done all day – before limping off to a warm bed.*

The End has come and gone and I learn something New about it as it does so, as like everything else this long Road ends, bringing me Home and rolling me to a weary stop at last:

The End is Fun.

I discover on a beach trail a broken rubber band twisted into a figure-eight. Sideways, infinity seems to have a hole in it at the bottom (or at the top, if you walk around to the other side).

THE END

* Footnote: My maternal grandfather loved to watch boxing too. I never knew him; I know him only through our shared genes and our shared joy of watching two men beat the snot out of one another.





foot from all of the pacing I did - pacing helps me think. I must have been doing some serious thinking. After I was released from the mental health hospital, it would take months to heal. A nurse can really grab one's attention by using the word "amputation."

In my early twenties I had a girlfriend who told me she had bipolar disorder. She never really trusted our relationship, even when I said I'd run away to San Francisco and live with her. "I know how people can change," she often said. One day out of the blue she locked herself in the bathroom of my apartment. When I went to check on her I found she had locked the door. "I'm so sorry," she said over and over, dozens of times, maybe a hundred. But she never explained. She moved to Maine a few days later and I never saw her again. That's what bipolar people are like, I thought. Must avoid them in the future.

When she referred to people changing, what she meant I think was that *she* changed over and over. This is common among people with bipolar disorder. They often change seemingly completely, and just as often forget what they were like before.

Some part of me must have subconsciously suspected there was some unknown and vague problem with my health, something not right in my state of mind: why else would I have dwelt so persistently on the subject of Doom, and capitalized it just like the word Fun and all the others? It seems logical to suppose my mind knew itself to be sick and this was the way it came out.

Having knocked myself out to write the book - the first

So there it is.

Aside from some deletions, I have left the text nearly untouched since the day I first declared it "finished," a term that seems wildly ironic now. I am writing new material these days, and have, as I had for this book, high hopes for it. Sid, the youngest of my cats, is still with me now, old and creaky as he was young and wild when I composed this book. Sadly, Steve and Torgo have passed on to the great, fuzzy, catnip-besotted beyond.

Once I stopped (as recounted in the Epilogue) I never resumed travelling. I had correctly forecast the problem of stopping. Readyng the book for the printer - not to mention devising a plan to sell it - occupied all my time, and time that grew harder and harder to make sense of as it passed day by day, a genuine obsession. I actually wore a hole in the bottom of my right

I had ever written - it only seemed to make sense that I also had to knock myself out to self-publish the book. I had been working hard every day to finish the book, so so what if I had to keep going at that speed? I assumed I could handle it. In retrospect, here were two more bugaboos I had flagged in the book - overwork and too fast a pace - and I was violating them. But I thought, having raised them as potential problems, I was immune to them. But I didn't even suspect at that time that I was bipolar. That changes everything.

Everything is harder. And one's feeling of invincibility is often enhanced to absurd proportions. Everything that subsequently happened makes sense - provided one knows I am bipolar. And gone was the living in Nature, exchanged for vacation houses in the suburbs. The keel that had kept me on course, the compass I had relied on to chart a stable course, was gone, and I made no attempt to account for its loss. After all, I would soon be rich and famous. I could get back to Nature then, I supposed. If anyone could afford to take it for granted, it was me.

Bipolar disorder feels to me almost like reverse blindness. Far from not being able to see what is in front of you, if anything you see too much. When undiagnosed, I had thought I was rare, if not absolutely unique. Now I know that many of the aspects of myself that I thought more than odd were actually common to bipolar people. It was like being an alien and thinking yourself perhaps the last and only one of your species, and discovering your true home planet, and it is full of people like you. I had thought I was alone - living like Doctor Who again.

For all my wandering along the shores of the turbulent Pacific Ocean, it never once occurred to me that it was a metaphor for my own moods. Here is the blind spot of all blind spots. I don't know if I didn't want to look or if I just didn't think about myself enough to see it - although given the autobiographical nature of the book this last seems unlikely. I think it was the former. So I put it down here, in the afterword to the epilogue of the second edition. Let's call it better late than never.

So thoroughly did I enjoy the feeling of being stopped - of not being forced to move after four years of it - that I accumulated far more things than I needed: a printer to make prints of my photos to sell to tourists and the paper on which to print them (but no plan to actually go about it), new clothes to go along with the old (the old were fine), various items I had taken from my trailer prior to putting it into storage. I forgot what in the book I had called the first rule of *The Road*: travel light. And my state of mind caused me to forget about move-out day; by the time it arrived the items were scattered all over the house I was renting. One chaotic morning of stuffing the bed of my truck with all of my items, in a panic, cats mewling at me constantly in the confusion, and by the time I finally rolled down the slope leading from the hilltop rental house, my nerves were shot. Shot and going fast, and then gone.

I crossed a river, pulled over to a roadside pull-out, and wept, the first time I had done so since my truck had broken down on an interstate highway in New Mexico four years earlier, in the first month of my cross-country travel. I don't cry. So when I do, it means something serious.

I had next a twelve-day stay in a vacation duplex - actually I had rented both halves of the house, because the rules said only two pets were allowed in each rental, and I had three (I found out later they would have had no problem had I only taken one of the two units; I had doubled the cost for no reason and my rapidly dwindling pile of cash was growing smaller and smaller) - and when I arrived and had moved my junk in, I laid down in bed, pulled the covers to my chin, and closed my eyes. And I never woke up.

I never woke up only because I never fell asleep. I've read that the human body can only remain conscious for a few days at most. I would put my case on record - though you have to take my word for it, as I was alone - because it turns out a person can stay up for twelve days with no sleep, though it does cause one to go somewhat insane. I suffered a near-total break with reality. I say near-total because I could still function, in a weird, mutated way, which made the experience much worse. I imagine complete lunacy would be better than seventy-five percent lunacy, as the latter experience contains enough that is recognizable that to see reality acting so radically differently but still maintaining some horrific semblance of normalcy is truly terrifying, the same trick that makes horror films that still adhere to the rules of physics and physiology even more frightening than those that break all the rules.

I began to hear voices, only not in my ears. The voices came directly into my head, and always made sense. Worse, I began to talk with them

The people in the A-frame house across the street

began using sophisticated surveillance technology to eavesdrop on my conversations with the cosmic force. I didn't need a tinfoil hat to thwart them; I only needed to speak quietly.

The most extraordinary part of the story was the couple next to me. The tallish, gray-haired man was me, come back from the future to bear witness to this momentous twelve-day breakdown. The woman was my wife from the future. We were time travelling tourists, reliving the moment when I - the current I - became the greatest prophet humanity had ever known. I never talked to me - in fact, I did my best to avoid myself, crawling beneath windows, going outside only well after dark, and so on. It was critical that I never see me.

Into this mix came a real email from a friend, assuring me out of the blue that they intended to kill themselves. I didn't have any idea that they were even unhappy. It was this - and the sense of shame that I, who had completely neglected my personal life in the drive first to write the book and then to find a way to publish it, had no response to give them in their moment of need - that I am convinced caused the final break with reality, along with a sign outside a local hotel that I noticed while out driving around. The sign said:

PHILOSOPHERS CONVENTION

There are plenty of other details, but they won't fit this weird afterword. Suffice it to say that when the twelve days were up and I hadn't yet moved out of the house, the owners called the police. The police called an ambulance, and both the ambulance and the police

showed up at the same time. The ambulance wanted to take me to a mental hospital, but for some reason I went with the police instead. This was a mistake. They arrested me, and the drive to the police station, I was sure, was a police escort to honor me. Apparently, word of my greatness had gotten out somehow.

The jail cell was a new nightmare, and the worst part of the entire experience. I didn't know why I was there, or really even where I was. No one explained it to me. I vaguely remember ranting and screaming, not at the guards, but at the mysterious force I was convinced was watching me. The injustice of being locked away and apparently forgotten about, removed from Nature - in a city, no less - was too much to bear silently. I also vaguely remember being held down by police officers and injected, and then Nothing. I must have slept for about twenty-four hours - at least I finally got some sleep - but nothing was done to mend my break with reality. When I woke up - nearly blind because I did not have my glasses - there was no distinguishing between my nightmares (I remember them all quite vividly) and reality such as it was. The sick glow of fluorescent lighting made night indistinguishable from daytime, and I was not fed - perhaps the police were scared to go near my cell - and without toilet paper, or blankets, or even the foam mattress that covered the concrete slab that passed for a bed. All had been removed when I was injected with the unknown knock-out drug.

When the comedy/philosophy troupe The Firesign Theater came up with their famous question "What is reality?" I doubt they had so deep a confusion over the matter in mind.

When at last I was released, numb from the experience and still unable to see, I was taken to a mental health facility for a ten-day stay at the state's expense. Here I was at last diagnosed.

Surprising to most in perfect mental health, most people with bipolar disorder when posed the question of whether they would choose *not* to be bipolar, say they would not take that deal. Bipolar disorder is an odd, perhaps unique, malady: a disease of which most who suffer would not be cured even if they could. Think about that. I pride myself on my mental faculties, but from time to time I enjoyed - even revelled - in the revelation that it was possible for me to go insane. I too wouldn't be "cured" of my bipolarity either. And I haven't truly been insane since, just subject to moods that sometimes flicker off and on like a strobe. My insanity, it seems, was strictly temporary, and that affliction I decidedly would not want ever again.

I Now maintain a tight grip on reality. The medications are extraordinary in this regard, it must be acknowledged. Having gone nuts once, I'm not eager to repeat it, but Now I know the warning signs, know what to do to deal with them, and most particularly relevant, I know how to work without running myself into the ground. I sleep well - if anything I sleep too much. And no problem will ever be big enough to change that. Sleep is good.

If you enjoyed this book, I hope you will visit my newly rebooted website, www.jbelhem.com, and make a do-

nation or order a print of a photo that caught your eye (it would look great on your wall) or a physical copy of the book - the physical copies are incidentally a limited first edition handmade run, and deserve special mention. They are professionally printed, but the binding I do myself. I punch holes in the book block, slap on the pre-printed cover, and affix a branded leather-bound spine, which in the future will be replaced with fabric - don't complain, the book was available in leather for years and very few bought it. The fabric will shave about ninety percent of the time spent binding the book, and some day readers may get together and speculate that their copies of the book were bound in the same fabric, thus providing something for strangers to talk about - I make no apologies. My fingertips will no longer throb with the pain of dealing with leather, and the leather, classy as I still think it was, was another by-product of my bipolar disorder. It makes one feel invincible, which as I age seems less and less likely to me. The paperback has more material than the e-Book, as a result of my recent editing, but it is nothing too special, which is why I cut it.

The bipolar - and more significantly, the weekend in a jail cell - are too juicy as subjects to be thrown into a post-epilogue plea for attention like this one and then forgotten. They will show up in my next book and will be worth waiting for. But I need money to finish the books (the next book is the first of a sci-fi trilogy). If you can order a print or a copy of this book in realistic 3D (that is, a physical book), it being part of the limited first edition of two hundred copies, or make a donation via Paypal, I will be able to finish the new books in style, which is important. Give it up for a brotha.

Anyway, thanks for checking this out. It means the world to me to know that people are reading this book and liking it. Help if you can, and if not, thanks anyway just for reading it. It sounds pathetic to write that but it really isn't. Who would ignore the romance of touching a stranger where it counts, the romance of digits, of the internet, of feeling and having felt of talking about it? Herein lies art.

As you were.

-JB, Huntington, January 2018

